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SIEGE OF TERRA

GARRO: KNIGHT OF GREY

James Swallow

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CONTENTS

Cover
Backlist
The Horus Heresy: Siege of Terra
Garro: Knight of Grey
Dramatis Personae
Quotes
One
Two
Interval I
Three
Four
Interval II
Five
Six
Afterword
Acknowledgements
About the Author
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THE HORUS HERESY®

SIEGE OF TERRA

It is a time of legend.

The galaxy is in flames. The Emperor's glorious vision for humanity is in ruins. His favoured son, Horus, has turned from his father's light and embraced Chaos.

His armies, the mighty and redoubtable Space Marines, are locked in a brutal civil war. Once, these ultimate warriors fought side by side as brothers, protecting the galaxy and bringing mankind back into the Emperor's light. Now they are divided.

Some remain loyal to the Emperor, whilst others have sided with the Warmaster. Pre-eminent amongst them, the leaders of their thousands-strong Legions, are the primarchs. Magnificent, superhuman beings, they are the crowning achievement of the Emperor's genetic science. Thrust into battle against one another, victory is uncertain for either side.

Worlds are burning. At Isstvan V, Horus dealt a vicious blow and three loyal Legions were all but destroyed. War was begun, a conflict that will engulf all mankind in fire. Treachery and betrayal have usurped honour and nobility. Assassins lurk in every shadow. Armies are gathering. All must choose a side or die.

Horus musters his armada, Terra itself the object of his wrath. Seated upon the Golden Throne, the Emperor waits for his wayward son to return. But his true enemy is Chaos, a primordial force that seeks to enslave mankind to its capricious whims.

The screams of the innocent, the pleas of the righteous resound to

the cruel laughter of Dark Gods. Suffering and damnation await all should the Emperor fail and the war be lost.

The end is here. The skies darken, colossal armies gather. For the fate of the Throneworld, for the fate of mankind itself...

The Siege of Terra has begun.

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SIEGE OF TERRA

GARRO: KNIGHT OF GREY

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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The Knights Errant

NATHANIEL GARRO – Former Agentia Primus, former battle-captain of the Death Guard

HELIG GALLOR – Former legionary of the Death Guard

The XIV Legion, 'Death Guard'

MORTARION – Primarch

TYPHUS, THE TRAVELLER – First Captain

The Imperial Army

MAED KOSTAGAR – Captain, Dilectio Tier, Marmax garrison

ROLD GREFF – Trooper, Dilectio Tier, Marmax garrison

Others

EUPHRATI KEELER – The Living Saint, former remembrancer

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‘Those who embrace their own fate fear nothing.’

– *Last Books of Sight*, Hirundus Iago [date unknown]

‘There must come a moment when the soul knows: this far, and no further. But we are cursed never to hear that warning until it is too late.’

– attributed to the remembrancer Ignace Karkasy [M31]

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ONE

Dining on Ashes

The Last of the Few

You Know Her

With one heavy footfall after another, the warrior giant advanced up the narrow spiral stairwell.

His ceramite boots were too wide for stairs that had been built for the tread of common men, the shoulders of his power armour far too broad for the tight, human-scale confines of the towering minaret. The edges of his wargear's pauldrons would catch on the walls from time to time, gouging lines out of the fire-blackened granite to mark his passing.

He was forced to negotiate places where the sides of the passageway had been blown in by shell impacts, picking his way over heaps of sooty debris, and often, the grisly remains of slain defenders.

The damage and the carnage grew ever worse the closer he got to the top. The tower had been home to a lascannon nest that rained beams of crimson hell down on the enemy throughout the night's fighting, drawing concentrated fire in return. At length, he emerged into the smoggy cold of

the day as the spiral stairs deposited him on the highest level that still remained intact. The beheaded ruin of the minaret hummed with a hard breeze that carried particles of gritty, dirty sleet with it.

The dead – men and women in the grey carapace armour of the resident garrison – lay where they had fallen, half-buried in drifts of ash and broken brickwork. Some still clutched their guns to them, the muzzles of the rifles glistening with the oily rainbow sheen of heat-damaged metal. He saw burst flesh seared from within marking many of the soldiers, and toxin-bloated faces on others that stared sightlessly at the sky. Death had touched them with terror and agony in their final moments.

Compelled by a sudden impulse, the warrior checked his air sensors, then removed his grey-hued battle helmet and mag-locked it to his hip. He looked up past the missing roof of the tower, to snatch a glimpse of what the fallen had seen.

Above, the forbidding sky had a strange, sickly hue, lined with striations of black cloud reaching from north to south, and on the wind were sounds that might have been voices, if one listened for them. Hundreds of metres up, above the perimeter of the great aegis field, metal birds caught the weak sunlight as they wheeled and turned around one another, trading streaks of sun-hot plasma from their guns. The keening whine of their engines and the faint chug of their weapons reached him over another, steady sound coming from far away – a low drumming like the beating of a gigantic heart.

Past the atmo-fighters locked in their endless dogfight, the strange storms of brassy lightning, and up into the higher ranges of the reddish Himalazian sky, shapes loomed in the heavens. Great baroque forms floating in near-orbit, some on fire, others crackling with arcane energies. Starships as big as city-states drifted there, their numbers and their masses so great that their proximity tormented the planet’s gravitational and magnetic fields, warping weather patterns from pole to pole.

The skies of Terra were no longer the domain of the Imperium of Man, the warrior reflected. The skies belonged to Horus Lupercal, *may his name be blighted*, to the treacherous Warmaster and the Traitor Legions at his banner. Only the stone and the mud were held by those who remained loyal to the Emperor, and even those elements were in danger of slipping away.

After a breath, the warrior took another step, moving onto an unsteady outcropping of broken masonry and laser-scarred ouslite. He let his gaze

drop to the riven battleground beneath the minaret, and the fields of destruction rolling away to the broken horizon.

The spindly tower was the only one to have survived the recent onslaught, emerging from the cracked and shattered domains of the gigantic Colossi Bastion, reaching to the burnt sky like a skeletal, accusing finger atop a beheaded mountain. A vast, seemingly endless landscape of rubble stretched towards the gutted shell of the bastion's sibling fortress, Corbenic Gard, and in the direction of the City of Sight. Ahead of the warrior, the Anterior Gate and the outer dominions of the great Imperial Palace still stood intact, but in the eerie red corpse-light, the huge, maze-like conurbations resembled forms scrimshawed out of old bone.

His face turned towards the heartbeat sound, towards the Lion's Gate and what lay past it. Eyes narrowing, he raised a battered monocular scope to look across the great distance, searching the canyons of debris and the towering wall of thick, abyssal smoke obscuring much of the battle zone's reaches.

He picked out forms in bright crimson moving in packs through the destruction: some on foot, others riding slab-shaped tanks or speeders blurred by anti-gravity fields as they navigated the shattered avenues choked by the spill of ruined buildings. All were drawing back, likely towards more adequately reinforced strongpoints, abandoning the kill boxes and poisoned quadrants that remained from their last engagement.

These were the rearguard elements of Brother-Captain Raldoron's forces, sons of the IX Legion, the noble Blood Angels of Sanguinius. In the past desperate hours, Raldoron's army, and that of the White Scars Legion under the command of the Khan himself, had made war on Horus' invaders. It had been a brutal and harrowing skirmish in a conflict that daily set new standards in horror and destruction – and ultimately, it had counted for little. The line the Blood Angels and the White Scars had fought so hard to maintain could not hold indefinitely.

The word had finally been given. The eastern bastions could no longer be adequately secured by the loyalist forces, and they were declared indefensible, surrendered in the face of the enemy advance.

The enemy.

How those words burned in the warrior's heart.

Once, in what seemed like another life, a whole other existence, he had

marched alongside those whom the Blood Angels and White Scars had fought to a standstill. In the time before the great betrayal at Isstvan, in countless righteous battles and noble crusades, the warrior had been proud to be a part of the XIV Legion, the Death Guard. Now he had only shame, sorrow and rage for those who had once been his oathsworn brethren. Their broken vows to Terra and the Emperor were wounds upon his heart that would never heal, and that he could never forgive.

He looked past the withdrawing Blood Angels elements – the sole loyalist forces remaining on the field, the White Scars having already decamped and moved off in search of better odds – and away to the wall of curdled smoke marking the edge of the traitors' advance.

It wasn't *just* smoke. One who studied it carefully would see that the hazy mass moved against the direction of the wind, with apparent conscious intent. Even from kilometres away, he saw the glitter of reflected light off the millions of tiny wings that made up the plague swarms.

And among the haze strode huge forms as tall as hab-blocks, unhurried and inexorable, moving as one in deliberate lockstep. Each massive footfall sounded across the distance to the warrior's ears, the steady drumbeat rhythm of corrupted steel and corroded iron against the earth.

The giant bipedal war machines of the Legio Mortis were on the march, each passing moment bringing them ever nearer to the walls of the Inner Palace. Within hours, they would be within optimal range and a new rain of fire would begin. Oath-breakers of the Mechanicum, bound to Horus' perfidy, the Warlords, Reavers and Iconoclasts of the Death's Heads would leave only radioactive dust in their wake. Somewhere at the feet of those killer god-machines marched phalanx upon phalanx of tainted Death Guard legionaries, and the warped things they had allied with.

His brothers were coming for him, he could feel it in his blood and bone. They were coming for them all.

In every corner of the Palace's gigantic span, a thousand small battles were being fought, with countless battalions of soldiers, aviators, gunners, war devices and legionaries deep in their own brutal engagements. Whole districts had been laid waste, filled with the bodies of unburied dead left to decay and fester by comrades who had no time to tend to the innumerable fallen. The pall of the worst war this planet had ever known hung over everything, the dense reek of aerosolised vitae, spent promethium and

cordite changing the atmosphere into a constant funereal haze. It was no exaggeration to voice the thought – these desperate times had the colour of the end of days, of an apocalypse that would, in its fullness, soon erase the rule of mankind from the planet of its origin.

No living soul on Terra could ignore the whispers in every shadow, and the terrors – some conjured by tricks of the mind, others real in fang and talon – lurking in the darkness. There could be no rest, no respite, no quarter asked for or given. Hell had disgorged itself upon the planet, rising from the depths of nightmares and falling from the blackness between the stars. Whole worlds were ending here in every passing second, some of them the lives of ordinary men, others the futures of those who would be left behind.

And yet… in *this* place, in *this* moment, there was only desolation. In this lacuna amid the bloodshed, the sullen peace of the grave held sway.

A new sound caught the warrior's attention, a trickle of stone fragments and the juddering buzz of damaged motors as something moved beneath one of the rubble piles. Warily, he crossed the open space to the source of the noise, and with one gauntleted hand, he shoved away a fallen piece of ceiling. The action revealed the remains of two bodies, Army troopers most likely assigned to the lascannon crew. They had fallen together, united in death, but what killed them was still here.

A foetid, bloated shape trembled in the daylight, nestled between the bodies of the dead men. No larger than a fuel barrel, it lay atop the corpses. On one surface, a cluster of insect eyes regarded the warrior blankly, and two filth-caked propeller modules protruded from its flanks, blades turning in weak, jerky motions. A cluster of chitinous mandibles scraped and wavered in the air.

A blight drone: halfway between a machine and an engineered life form, fleshy wattles and mollusc-shell animated by foul processes the warrior loathed to imagine. Trapped under the fallen roof, the drone was trying to repair its own damage by opening the dead men to use their bones, sinews and skin as replacement parts.

His jaw set in a hard line, the warrior's disgust expressed itself in swift violence. He stamped the drone into a pulpy mess, and as it died with a squeal, it let off a puff of reeking vapour. He recoiled, grimacing as faint traces of the poison touched his bare face. The warrior's transhuman physiology endured the toxin with ease, but where the vapour's heavy

droplets fell on the dead men, their bodies turned to black slurry.

The warrior drew himself up, and spat to clear his lungs. His dark, wary eyes sat in a face criss-crossed with trophy scars from past wars, beneath a heavy brow that carried the brass service studs of a ranked battle-captain. His skull was shorn and he wore no beard, his pale face reminiscent of some ancient Hellenikai statuary from the age before Old Night. His aspect was rigid and searching, a man one might think was bound by great duty, yet lost to his cause. A warrior destined to live and to die alone.

But not today, it seemed. Someone was coming up the narrow stairwell, following in his footsteps, someone equally unsuited to the human-scale confines of the passageway.

His hand dropped to the great power sword sheathed at his belt, fingers tightening around the hilt. He sensed no immediate danger at hand, but it would take only a heartbeat to draw the blade. He had learned through bitter experience that to lower his guard was to invite ill-fortune.

Presently, a figure emerged from the broken mouth of the stairwell, another giant man-shape in powered armour rising into the daylight. Both wore the same stripe of wargear: Mark VI Corvus-pattern plate, heavy in form like that of the Blood Angels below on the battlefield, but drained of colour. The ceramite of their greaves and gauntlets was a shade of grey like slate, like an ocean storm.

‘Well met, kinsman,’ said the new arrival, his words bereft of warmth.

Nathaniel Garro, former battle-captain of the Death Guard, former Agentia Primus of Malcador the Sigillite, inclined his head in a nod. ‘Helig Gallor,’ he said, recognising the other warrior by the pattern of his movements more than his voice. ‘You are not yet dead.’

‘Despite all attempts of the fates,’ came the dour reply. Gallor removed his helm to mirror Garro’s aspect, revealing a familiar, ever-grave expression.

Gallor too had once been a son of Mortarion, one of the Death Guard Legion, and his path mirrored Garro’s in the warrior’s rejection of perfidy against Terra. Both were remnants from the ideal of a Legion that no longer existed, the last of a handful of loyalists whose gene-sire primarch had turned his back on the Emperor and embraced treachery. Both had, for a time, found new direction as Knights Errant under the command of the great psyker Malcador, as agents of the Emperor’s right hand.

But despite their shared circumstances and common origins, there was

little comradeship between the two warriors. Garro considered Gallor to be imprudent, even undisciplined. For his part, Gallor thought of Garro as stiff, haughty and arrogant.

Gallor nodded towards Garro's shoulder pauldron. 'You no longer carry the mark of the Sigillite upon your armour.'

'It has not proven to be an issue.' Garro gave a curt nod. 'Malcador generously released me from my service to the Throne… As if a mere etching on ceramite was all that tethered me to that duty.'

'Only in death does duty end.' Gallor repeated the old, rote maxim without conscious recollection, the words coming from the deep reservoir of hypnogogic training that had been imprinted on both legionaries as initiates.

'Aye. So what duty has compelled you to seek me out in these bleak days, brother? I have not laid eyes on you since the mission at the Saturnine Wall.'

'Bleak?' Gallor echoed the word, deflecting the question. 'They are, at that. But tell me, do you not carry a flame of hope in your breast, safe beneath your armour?' He pointed to the ornate golden eagle across the cuirass that shrouded Garro's torso. 'I wonder. Do you not hold an ephemeral light in your spirit? Isn't that your way now?'

Garro's lips thinned at the veiled challenge, uncertain where it was leading. 'I believe what I believe. That the Emperor protects.'

'He cannot protect everyone,' said Gallor. 'He is mighty, but He is no god.' Then the other warrior cocked his head. 'Or is He?'

Garro said nothing, refusing to be baited. Long before the Siege of Terra had begun, even before the Warmaster's betrayal, there were those who considered the Emperor of Mankind as more deity than mortal. They had many names – the followers of the *Lectitio Divinitatus:* Truekind, Imperiads, Lightbringers – and many expressions of their devotion, such as it was. Garro did not consider himself among any one of these groups, but he did *believe.* He did have *faith.*

It was only when called upon to fully quantify that conviction that words failed him. 'I have faced death many times, against impossible odds, and still I live,' he murmured. 'There must be a reason, by the Throne. Once, I was told that I was *of purpose.* I choose to hold to that still.' He looked away. 'Call it what you will, brother. I care not if you think I am deluded.'

To his surprise, Gallor gave a rare – if bitter – laugh. 'I would not dare to!

And in days as dark as these, who am I to challenge what gives a warrior succour? No, I only sought to know if your attitude has shifted on such matters. I see it has not.’

‘Oh, it has,’ Garro corrected, a grim solemnity sweeping over his expression. ‘My faith has been tested, again and again, but never as gravely as now.’ He gestured towards the ruins heaped at the horizon. ‘Terra burns about us, in such profusion that a single sword, a single boltgun cannot hope to turn back the fire. I have lent my aid to the Palace’s defenders wherever I can, wandering between the battlements and donjons, and yet the taint of futility is forever at my back.’

Gallor nodded. ‘I feel it too.’

When Horus’ fleet had come, when his ships had darkened the sky, some stirring of martial exhilaration had been reborn in Garro’s twin hearts. He stood with his ersatz kinsman Garviel Loken and made ready for a battle of such glory that it would be sung of for ten thousand years; but the reality of the grinding, monstrous siege-war had burned through that. The great imperious scope of the Palace city-state, once the venerated jewel of Terra, had become a hellish crater filled with shed blood and the detritus of brutal war.

An inescapable foreboding filled his soul. As if sensing the great cogs of some unseen mechanism turning about him, Garro felt the fates were aligning in ways he could only guess at. And now, with his lost Legion on the approaches, and with his former primarch marching somewhere among their number, the true power of something he rarely knew gripped him.

Fear.

‘He is out there,’ said Garro, voicing the thought.

‘Mortarion.’ Gallor knew of whom he spoke, grimacing around the name. ‘Our traitor lord, come to plague us anew.’

‘Aye.’ Words pushed to be spoken, but Garro held them back, suddenly uncertain.

What could he say to Gallor that would not cast a greater pall over their conversation? That he dreaded what would come to pass at the moment Mortarion stood before them. That he could not escape the sense that he was living on borrowed time, and worse, that Nathaniel Garro’s end would come before he had the chance to fulfil his purpose in this life.

And most treacherous and terrible, the words he dared not utter, that he

could barely even countenance – the awful possibility that Horus Lupercal might actually take Terra for himself, despite everything they had done to defy his heresy.

A chill cut through Garro's blood and his hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. *I will die a thousand times before I let that come to pass.*

He released a held breath and studied Gallor anew. 'You did not answer my first question. You have not said why you are here. You have reason to distract me from my musings. Did someone send you?'

'In a way,' allowed Gallor. 'There is something you need to see.'

Garro's kinsman would not be drawn further, citing both his own reticence and the possibility of long-ranging traitor observers watching their position. Instead, Gallor silently led him back down to ground level and across the broken landscape at a loping, swift pace.

They moved through shallow canyons of debris and over burnt-out combat vehicles, skirting deep craters where seething bowls of heat still sizzled from macro-shell impacts. Presently, the battlefield levelled out into the remains of some great plaza. Once beautiful mosaics and elegant stone friezes had been fused into masses of black glass, and the nubs of tall statues were all that remained of a sculpture orchard in the centre.

They came to a small forward observation post, little more than a clump of plastek bivouacs, in the process of being torn down by a crew of Blood Angels Legion serfs. Four warriors of the IX Legion watched them arrive from afar, giving the two Legionless cursory nods of greeting but nothing else.

Garro noted the elegant uniformity of the faces of the Blood Angels. Despite their war-scars, they remained handsome in aspect, echoing their winged, angelic progenitor. But their nobility seemed muted, as if the war had knocked it out of them. He knew from shared battles in the past that beneath the Blood Angels' dignity there lay a murderer's fury when provoked, and Garro imagined that shackled rage lying closer to the surface now, ready to be released.

'In here.' Gallor halted by a camouflaged yurt, pulling back the door flap so that Garro could enter. Ducking his head, the warrior passed inside, into shadow.

Gallor followed him, moving to a pile of storage crates, delving into one to

retrieve something. ‘I asked our cousins to guard this for me while I sought you out,’ he explained. ‘I wanted to gauge your disposition before I showed it to you.’

Garro folded his arms. ‘I am in no mood for games and obfuscation, know that,’ he said. ‘What do you have there?’

‘See.’ The other warrior showed him the glittering shape of a hololithic diamond. Reams of data or imagery could be stored inside its complex crystalline structure, preserved and virtually indestructible. He inserted the gemstone into the reader matrix of a tactical projector in the corner of the space.

With a soft hum, the projector came to life, breathing out a smoky sphere of holographic light. The diamond’s lattice translated its contents into three-dimensional pictures that wavered and danced between the two warriors.

Garro saw aerial views of other bastions along the fighting line – he recognised Corbenic when it was still intact, the massive fortresses of Gorgon Bar and Marmax. Gallor’s gauntleted fingers moved with delicacy, manipulating the projector’s controls to dash forward through the data stored on the diamond.

‘Like you,’ he went on, ‘I too have wandered the edges of this siege, from the Europa Wall all the way to the Helios Gate, providing what assistance I can to those who need another gun or another strong arm. There has been no shortage of those at disadvantage.’

Garro nodded. ‘When there are no orders given, we make our own.’

‘Indeed.’ Gallor hesitated, and Garro sensed he was framing his next words with care. ‘In my travels, intelligence has come to me, some of it useless, some of it accurate. A few days ago, I encountered a flyer crew whose craft had been shot out from under them, the survivors retreating on foot towards loyalist lines. They gave me this…’ He tapped the diamond. ‘And they told me a story.’

Gallor went on, insisting that he had spoken to no one else of what the aircrew had said. He had brought it straight to Garro, keeping it secret from the Blood Angels he marched with, from everyone. At first, Garro did not understand why his kinsman was acting with caution, but as the other Knight Errant unfolded the tale, the reason became clear.

South of the Colossi Bastion stood its sister-citadel, Marmax – another gargantuan holdfast built to the Emperor’s own design and fortified beyond

that by His steadfast son, Rogal Dorn of the Imperial Fists. Like the now abandoned Colossi, the domains of Marmax were also in heavy contact with traitor forces – something that would only worsen with the renewed advance of the Death Guard and the Legio Mortis.

Soldiers perished in droves each day upon the battlefield, but Gallor's story spoke of a peculiar anomaly among the tally of the fallen. In a sector of the Marmax Bastion's north-western face, where the fighting was among the most violent, the defenders of a zone called the Dilectio Tier were *holding* their ground while all around them were crumbling.

'They defy the odds,' said Gallor, with a scowl. 'Day after day, so I was told.' As he spoke, he dialled in the projector's images, finding the location among the clutter, zooming in to enlarge the tier until it filled the interior of the yurt. 'They should be dead and ashes twenty times over, Garro. And yet, *they hold.* These common soldiers, these ordinary humans have beaten back attacks that should have annihilated them.'

'You suspect something… *corruptive*… at work there?' Garro hesitated to find the right phrasing. He had almost said the word *daemonic*, before he stopped himself.

'At first,' Gallor noted. 'But the reality appears to be quite the reverse. I sought to learn more, and in doing so I discovered that someone is moving among these soldiers. A voice, Garro. Not quite a leader, but a…' He frowned. 'A confidante, you could say. This person is rallying these soldiers to fight far beyond what their normal abilities should allow.'

'A psyker, then.'

'Unclear.' Gallor shrugged. 'You are better qualified than I am to answer that.'

Garro's expression mirrored his kinsman's. He was growing impatient. 'Speak plainly! What do you mean?'

'You know her,' said the other warrior, as he dialled in on a group of figures captured in the image of the embattled fortress, enhancing and sharpening it until distinct faces were visible.

Garro saw a frozen frame of dozens of Imperial Army troopers, caught with their arms and lasrifles raised to the air in a shout of victory. They looked battle-worn and weary, but their eyes were alight with that same defiant martial zeal Garro had felt on the day Horus came.

In the middle of the group was a woman in a threadbare civilian oversuit,

and all the troopers around her had a hand upon her shoulders or her back. Not in the manner of supplicants touching some holy object, but like friends, united in a simple moment of human connection.

He knew her.

'Keeler.' The name fell from Garro's lips in a hushed breath.

'The Saint,' said Gallor.

Garro shook his head. 'She never chose that name. Others laid it upon her, forced her to carry its weight. The truth is far more complex.'

He had thought her safe and protected, deep in one of the Emperor's most secure refuges, but to see the woman like this, her laughing face bare to the sky and open to attack at any instant… The raw shock of it made Garro's hands draw into fists.

Euphrati Keeler: once a remembrancer sent into the Imperial fleets to document the work of the Great Crusade through her picter and her artist's eye, she had passed beyond that life when events conspired to draw the woman into the Warmaster's machinations.

It changed her in ways that no one could ever have expected, and soon the threads of her fate became entwined with those of Nathaniel Garro. As Gallor had said, some knew her as the so-called Saint, the voice of the nascent Imperial Truth, of the divinity of the God-Emperor of Mankind. Some said she was touched by the Emperor's power, even that she might be a conduit to His greatness.

Garro knew her as something else. A guide. A light in the darkness that showed the way ahead. The woman who had counselled the warrior time and again since the tragedy at Isstvan.

Without her, he mused, *I would have been lost.*

But she was supposed to be in hiding, protected from danger until the fires of the Siege of Terra were put out.

'What is she doing there?' Garro bit out the words.

'I would say, she is doing the same as you and I,' said Gallor. 'Lending aid where she can.'

'She is in harm's way,' he retorted. 'This…' Garro gestured at the hololith. 'This is too great a risk. I must take her from Marmax, get her away before this reckless behaviour claims her life!' He stared into the image, trying to see into Keeler's thoughts.

What could compel her to put herself in so great a danger, to hide in plain

sight in the middle of a warzone?

‘I brought this to you because I know of your beliefs.’ Gallor eyed him. ‘Which I do not share. But that said, I do have faith of a kind – in *you*. Our differences aside, battle-captain, I understand that the Keeler woman has importance to whatever Imperium will come after Horus Lupercal lies dead. I will accompany you.’

‘Gratitude,’ offered Garro. ‘But you need not.’

‘I know,’ Gallor replied, ‘and yet I will. You may consider it misplaced nostalgia on my part, if you wish, for the days when we were Death Guard. When that meant something.’

‘Very well.’

Gallor removed the hololithic diamond and the projector image vanished. He weighed it in his hand, then added something more. ‘I will say this,’ he went on. ‘Prepare yourself for disappointment. She does not seem like the kind of woman who bows easily to the will of another. Man, legionary… or god.’

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TWO

Marmax

Only Truth

Whispers

Fire, smoke and fury crackled across the wide saw-tooth stonework of the Dilectio Tier, spilling over the ferrocrete slabs, roaring around rank after rank of the beleaguered defenders.

The spent powercell of her laspistol burned Maed Kostagar's stubby brown fingers as she cracked the weapon's barrel and plucked it out. Swearing animatedly under her breath, the captain tossed the hot cylinder along the battlement, into a waiting bin that was already near brimming with dead batteries from her company's rifles. One of the runner-servitors would come and drag the bin back to a charger maw, if of course the runner wasn't already cold meat and iron, lying somewhere she couldn't see in a pool of its own oils.

Kostagar tried not to think about running out of loads, or stubber rounds, or med-packs, or fighters, and she rammed a new cell into the gun's breech, snapping it closed with a flick of her wrist. The old weapon hummed to life

again, reliable as daybreak, rewarding her trust and care better than any of her ex-husbands ever had. But the batteries her troops hoarded were starting to go stale, becoming harder to recharge, and holding their wattage for shorter and shorter periods. Kostagar tried not to think about that as well.

She popped up out of cover and killed the closest of the coven-scum scrambling up the incline of the walls towards her. This outcast – as the troops had come to name their kind – was wrapped in soiled green sashes and made his way up the steep slope using crude hand-held claws welded from bits of corroded iron. His face was painted with something foul, a daub in the form of three rough circles framing wild eyes and a gaping mouth.

Kostagar's beam-shot shrieked through his chest, and exploded open the outcast's back in a welter of superheated blood. The attacker tumbled away down the slope, crashing into dozens of his comrades climbing up beneath him. He took some with him as his ragged corpse vanished into the battle-fog, but there were so many still coming. Each hour, it seemed as if a new army had come to besiege them.

Some had the claws or memory-metal ladders, others tools like miners' picks or impact hammers; some used cables dangling from cleats fired into the stone by pneumatic launcher. They came climbing up the outer tiers of the Marmax Bastion, chanting and screaming for blood, killing everything in their path. Tier after tier had already fallen to their predations, forcing Kostagar's forces to seal the stairwells and elevator tubes to the lower levels, and barricade themselves in place.

The men and women around her were a patchwork of survivors from ten different companies, that in her wisdom – or perhaps, her foolishness – she had managed to pull together. Their uniforms and battle gear were a mismatched collection of whatever they could salvage, whatever they had carried from the routing of their own units. She had them spread thin across the main approaches, doing the work of a force ten times their size, with half the firepower.

Dress guards and regular line infantry. Field police and rear-echelon servicemen. These and more, they carried lasrifles and stubbers, ballistic rod-throwers and quarrel launchers, and the only thing they had in common was the will to fight. The will to *keep* fighting, and damn the bleak truth of the end massing at their gate.

Kostagar had an assassin's eye, aiming and firing with care, and everywhere she landed a las-bolt, an invader died.

No one knew exactly where the outcasts had come from, with their madness and their bodies caked in filth and triad-shape tattoos. Some of the junior officers said that the traitors had brought them to Terra from worlds they had taken, that they were inductees chem-conditioned to serve as shock brigades. Others whispered fearfully that they were what became of those taken captive by the turncoats, persona-wipes thrown back at the very bastions they might once have manned.

Kostagar doubted the latter was true. The traitors did not take prisoners. And what she feared most was not the erasure of her mind, but the warning the outcast attacks presented.

Today, the Dilectio Tier was besieged by the enemy's human auxiliaries. That meant soon the *real* invaders would come, the Legions of dishonoured Astartes at the banner of the Warmaster.

The outcasts were just the start of this particular battle in the ongoing siege of the Imperial Palace, blunt instruments with little military artifice sent in to soften up the lines around Marmax. They would spend their cheap lives choking the guns of the fortress, eating into the morale of the defenders, whittling them down. Preparing the way for the hammer blow that would inevitably follow.

'What are they doing?' came a reedy cry, from a young man in carapace armour with a drum-fed stubber, firing bursts into the invaders' line. His eyes were wide. 'Are they breeding these whoresons down there like rats? There's too many of them!'

'So we keep shooting,' said the captain, drawing a startled flinch from the youth. *Greff. His name is Rold Greff,* she remembered. He hadn't seen her there, crouching nearby in the same revetment. 'Until they get the message, eh?'

Greff nodded woodenly, but she knew the cast to his gaze. The lad was lost behind it, terrified that each thump of his heart in his ears would be the last.

Like him and all the others firing down at the advance of the climbers, Kostagar was running on stale recaff, lho-sticks and precious little sleep. She knew that the shadow of fatigue lurked at her back, and if she let it come close, it would embrace her. Drag her down. Dull her thoughts.

And if that happens… The enemy would take the advantage and engulf

them.

The outcasts kept on coming, attacking out of the smoke at random intervals that were impossible to predict. Eventually they would wear out the resistance of everyone on the Dilectio Tier, just as they had the defenders on the levels beneath.

We are the last here. If we fall… the Marmax Bastion will be lost.

In the flyer silo on the far face of the fortress there was an aircraft that could, at a push, have evacuated everybody still fighting on this tier. But the order from the Master of the Siege, the primarch Rogal Dorn himself, was to hold. And so they would, until they could do so no longer.

Then a peculiar silence fell across the battlements, as if by random chance the drone of all the guns paused at once, and the screaming of the enemy was briefly stilled.

'Stand fast,' said a voice. *'I know it is hard. I know every breath is a struggle. Every step feels like a marathon. But you can do it. You* can *hold this line.'*

The voice was not a shout. It did not come as some martial roar or chest-beating exhortation. It was not a hymnal or a sermon. But not a whisper either, instead something strong, constant and honest. Everyone listened. Everyone heard it.

'I know what you have seen,' it said. *'The horrors you have witnessed and the sacrifices you have made. I know how empty your bellies are, how you wish you could make it all just* stop *for a moment, so we might rest. I know the darkness that you feel, the hollow in your hearts. The despair and the fear. But I also know how* strong *you are. I believe in all of you. You* can *do this. You will survive this.'*

Across open vox-channels or broadcast by speaker-horns, even carried on the stiff breeze itself, the voice was there for all of them.

For Kostagar, the voice recalled warm memories of her older sister Galae, long dead now but never far from her thoughts. She had always known the right thing to say whenever little Maed had jolted awake from a nightmare or been caught by some sorrow. Others heard it differently, but to the same effect. A gentle speech that cut through fear and heartened those who listened.

'Stand fast,' said the voice, *'and look to those at your side. You fight for them. They fight for you. Together, we are defiant, no matter what we face.'*

Despite herself, the captain’s round face split in a grin. A swell of renewed confidence blossomed in her chest, and she dared to believe that perhaps they *could* prevail today, that they *could* hold the Dilectio Tier for a little longer.

At her side, Greff seemed to have grown in stature – or was it that he was just standing taller than he had a moment before? The young man was no longer cowering. He was still afraid, but now he refused to let his fear rule him.

‘Stand fast!’ Kostagar echoed the words, and the shout went down the line of the battlements, repeated back to her over and over.

‘Stand fast!’ ‘Stand fast!’ ‘Stand fast!’

Out of the chorus came gunfire, as the defenders fought back. Las-bolts split the smoke, sundering air molecules with shrill, steam-kettle screams. Stubber weapons, heavy-gauge man-portables and mag-fed shoulder-arms alike, rained shot into the scrambling mass of the outcasts.

The enemy forces withered under the defensive barrage and they fell back. Siege ladders and cables snapped away, attackers retreated. It soon became a hectic collapse, as the lines of the outcasts were broken. They fled desperately into the fire-smoke that billowed constantly from the levels below.

The war cries of the invaders faded to nothing. The attack had been repelled once more, and for a moment Kostagar and her troopers could breathe again.

She sank to her haunches and checked the charge on her laspistol, blowing vapour from the coolant fins down the long, ornate barrel. She had made it through another battle and lived to tell the tale.

Greff and the others sent up a ragged, insolent cheer that carried down the long walkways, as if they were terrace hooligans at some scrumball match, heckling the losing side. The captain let it go. She was too far past enforcing pointless notions of propriety on her troopers.

I’ll let them yell, she thought. *The time might come when that’s the only weapon they have left.*

‘Maed,’ said the voice, from close at hand. ‘You’re injured.’

‘I am?’ As the words left her mouth, Kostagar felt thick, warm fluid trickling down from her brow. She reached up and found a shallow cut that was bleeding badly, from where a splinter of stone had struck her in the

melee. She hadn’t noticed the pain. ‘Oh. It looks worse than it is,’ she said, and glanced up to see who had spoken.

‘Still, it could get infected. Let me help.’ Unremarkable in a common worker’s oversuit and a scrounged heavy-weather jacket a size too large for her, at first sight Euphrati Keeler looked no different to any other human surviving the Warmaster’s onslaught. She opened the field pack she carried over one shoulder, dug inside for adhesive bandages, and set to work cleaning and dressing the captain’s wound.

Keeler’s kindly, moderated voice was more soothing than the anti-chems she applied to the cut, and Kostagar smiled slightly. ‘Thank you. Thank you *again*, Euphrati. I don’t know how you do it… but your words are better than any doggerel or empty platitude.’

‘I just help people to remember their own courage,’ she said, dismissing the compliment. ‘Nothing more.’

From anyone else, that might have sounded like false modesty, but Keeler meant every word. Kostagar had met few people in her life she would have described as truly ‘selfless’, but this woman was one of them. She had appeared back when the fighting was still concentrated on the lower tiers, and offered her help with the wounded. Desperate for any aid, the captain was only too happy to accept her. Soon word spread about the woman with the kind eyes who carried a battered old picter, now and then snapping image captures of the battles, always giving time to those who needed it.

Like Kostagar’s long-passed sister, Keeler seemed to know the right thing to say to someone, and the right moment to say it. She didn’t flatter or cajole; she just brought the truth when it was needed.

The captain met the other woman’s gaze. ‘You know, without you… we wouldn’t have survived this long.’ She took a breath, framing a question that was almost a whisper. ‘Did someone *send* you, Euphrati?’

‘I saw a need.’ Keeler looked away, finishing the application of the bandage. ‘In all this horror, a person like me can only do one of two things. I could help, or I could flee. And I am tired of running.’

Kostagar rose to her feet, ready to press the question further, but a shout from further down the battlements drew her attention. Greff sprinted back to the captain’s side, panting hard in the thin Himalazian air. ‘Gunfire, ma’am,’ he reported. ‘Quad two, from down in the fog! Sounds like big-gauge bolters!’

Her jaw set. Were the outcasts coming back already, unwilling to grant the defenders even a minute of respite? She saw the same question in Greff's eyes and shook her head. 'I want to look for myself.'

Greff led her back along the battlements, picking a path through breaches in the high walls and sections where servitors worked to shore up the damage. Kostagar noted Keeler trailing behind her, and she saw the weary nods and weak smiles from her troops as the woman passed among them.

The captain heard the fighting before they got there. The flat bang of boltgun discharges sounded up the sides of the fortress like peals of thunder, and she dared to step up to the edge of the crenellations and risk a look down the wide stone slope. It was hard to see through the churning smoke, but Kostagar spotted brief splashes of heavy muzzle flare, jets of ejection flame lighting the haze from below.

There were other sounds. Loud screams of agony that were suddenly cut short, and the thudding boom of krak grenades. She saw something go spinning, wheeling away, as if thrown from one of the lower levels, out into the air to tumble to the ground far below.

'That was a person,' said Greff, chancing his own head to take a look. 'An outcast?'

'Are they fighting amongst themselves?' Kostagar wondered aloud. If so, it was new behaviour for the enemy.

The guns down below went quiet and the troopers on the quad stiffened, raising their lasrifles, anticipating what would come next.

Kostagar had her pistol drawn before she was even conscious of doing it, and she raised it up in a silent command. *Hold your fire.*

'Do you see?' Greff's voice dropped to a terrified hiss. He jabbed a finger towards the roiling mass of the smoke. 'Ma'am, look there!'

At first it was only the suggestion of movement, the vague outline of shapes drifting through the black haze. Things that could have been men, or something far worse. Kostagar heard the crunch of ceramite on breaking stone, and through her boots came the tremor of a giant's footfalls.

'I see,' she said.

Hulking forms sheathed in pitted, battle-worn power armour were making the ascent up the side of the bastion from the burnt-out level beneath. Kostagar's heart leapt into her mouth.

Legionaries.

No more outcasts, no more madmen and conscripts. These were the warlords of the Emperor’s own design, a single one of them the fighting equal of every soldier under her command. They carried guns and swords scaled for hands bigger than a man’s head. They were clad in wargear that could turn the hit of tank shells.

It was said their kind could not be killed, and for many years of her life Maed Kostagar had thought that to be propagandist hyperbole spun by the Council of Terra. But then she had been promoted from her home stationing among the plains of Indus to one of the coveted posts in the Imperial Palace. And there, she had seen a warrior of the Legiones Astartes in the flesh for the very first time, and come to question her cynicism.

Wherever the Legions walked, they brought destruction. Now two avatars of that fate climbed the stone at her feet, slow, steady and inexorable. The shades of their armour were indistinct, but the captain had seen the hordes of the Death Guard before, and she knew these could be no other.

She took aim with her pistol, and the troopers followed along with her. This would be their only chance to put up any meaningful resistance. Perhaps a lucky hit might save their lives. Kostagar knew that if even one legionary made it up to their tier with violent intent, no one would survive.

But as the captain’s finger tightened on the trigger, a delicate, long-fingered hand came to rest on her wrist and she heard the voice again.

‘Maed, please don’t,’ said Keeler. She was standing right next to her, out of cover on the lip of the battlements. ‘Let me speak to them.’

Are you insane? The words were forming on Kostagar’s lips as Keeler stepped past her, deliberately making herself fully visible. ‘Euphrati, no!’ She grabbed at the civilian’s sleeve and tried to yank her back.

Keeler shook off her grip and called out, ‘Welcome, Nathaniel! It is good to see you again!’

The warrior leading the pair halted in his climb and looked up, the faceted eyes of his battle helmet finding the two women. Kostagar was aware she was pointing her weapon directly at the legionary’s head, and slowly she lowered it. The warrior gave a nod in return.

‘By your leave, captain,’ he said, his words carrying up across the battlements. ‘May we cross your lines?’

‘If she vouches for you,’ managed Kostagar, recovering her power of speech, ‘then I suppose so.’

‘Like we have a choice?’ Greff muttered the words under his breath.

The captain gave him an admonishing glance as she stepped back. ‘Secure that talk and look sharp.’ Greff had the sense to look chastened, and he retreated before the two grey-armoured giants rose above the ramparts and climbed over.

It took all of Kostagar’s self-control to stand her ground before the towering warriors, and her knuckles whitened around the grip of her gun. She couldn’t bring herself to holster it, not while every fibre of her being was screaming *danger!*

Keeler stood between the legionaries, dwarfed by their size, but utterly unintimidated. As one, the warriors reached up to remove their helmets, revealing faces mapped with scarification.

Kostagar stared at them. The one who had spoken, the one Keeler had called ‘Nathaniel’, had different wargear from his comrade, and his aspect had a strange kindness to it that she did not expect. The other, who seemed younger, was watchful, nursing an air of distrust.

‘Here you are,’ said the older legionary, looking down at Keeler. ‘It vexes me and pleases me in equal measure to find you.’ He glanced in Kostagar’s direction. ‘Captain. I hope you will forgive our unannounced arrival. I am Nathaniel Garro, I am…’ He halted, as if correcting himself before he said more. ‘I am a servant of Terra and the Emperor of Mankind.’ Garro gestured at his comrade. ‘He is Helig Gallor. My brother in arms.’

‘You are Death Guard.’ *Or were they?* Now she saw them clearly, the colours of their armour were subtly different from that Legion. Still, everyone held their breath when she said the words.

Gallor grunted. ‘Once. But not since the betrayal.’

The captain decided to leave that statement where it lay. ‘My name is Maed Kostagar. I am company commander of the Dilectio Tier, Marmax garrison.’ She gave a nod. ‘What brings you to our particular piece of this hell?’

‘They’re here for me,’ Keeler answered for Garro.

‘Aye,’ said the elder legionary, and his steady gaze went back to the other woman. ‘We must talk, Euphrati.’

As he stood upon the watch-balcony, the ruins passed beneath the primarch’s jaundiced eye, a repeating landscape of beheaded towers,

shattered walls and the broken remains of pretty sculptures. All wreckage and destruction now, city-sized heaps of rubble that bore no resemblance to what they had once been when whole.

The war-barge *Greenheart*, carrying Mortarion's command post, floated low over the debris like a galleon crossing a stone sea, engines humming with power above the marching lines of the Death Guard and their auxiliaries. With mechanical regularity, the weak, spoiled light of Sol appeared and disappeared through the crimson sky as the bodies of the Titans walking with them passed in front of it, causing moments of brief eclipse. Striding high at the edges of their lines, the great machines rocked and swayed to the pace of their thunderous footsteps.

The Death Lord's thin and skeletal fingers reached for one of several censer spheres hanging from his ragged robes. Plucking it like a fruit from the bough of a tree, he rolled it in his pallid palm until the chems inside began to seethe. Threads of virulent smoke emerged from the holes in the sphere's surface and Mortarion held it to the vents of his breather mask, inhaling deeply.

The earthy reek of a particular poison filled his throat, and he felt the philtre warring with his flesh, trying to destroy it. But the ruin did not spread, it only curdled and became consumed by blood that was itself more toxic than the most lethal venom. His uneasy, altered flesh was new to him, and even now the primarch was still learning the gifts it granted. The potential that had been unlocked by his acceptance of the Grandfather's Mark changed and grew every day, and he no longer feared it. He had chosen to embrace it.

Mortarion drew in every last atom of the gaseous mixture, savouring the burn. The poison had been captured from the high crags of Barbarus, where no common humans could venture without suffering an agonising death.

Barbarus: the primarch's adopted home world, its blighted skies since ripped asunder by the petulance of the Lion and his Dark Angels. It would forever be a dead rock, and what true traces of it still remained were few. One less now, with the sphere's contents dispersed. He crushed the globe and tossed it over the balcony's corroded balustrade, into the wreckage of the Imperial Palace's outer domains.

Let it die. The notion whispered in his mind, perhaps from the depths of his own thoughts, or perhaps from other, more ephemeral dominions. *Let*

Barbarus die, and Terra with it. Let all the worlds die and be reborn anew.

It was a fitting thought. Tall, gaunt and hooded, with a great scythe across his back, Mortarion resembled the avatar of death's messenger from the myths of thousands of human cultures. He looked down at his hands and examined scars on his pale flesh, repetitions of marks in a triad formation.

Life. Decay. Rebirth. The three true states of existence.

He felt nothing at the prospect of destroying something as beautiful as his father's house. For what was beauty, after all, if not a bright and shining lie? He had never truly understood the depths of the concept, never drowned himself in the ideal like his brother Fulgrim. Beauty – forced and forged by the hand of men – was something ignoble in his eyes. It was fakery.

What Mortarion sought was only *truth.*

A wet sigh announced the opening of the iris door leading into his chamber, and the primarch turned from the balcony, even as two of his Deathshroud moved to intercept the unexpected visitor. Mortarion's silent praetorians were shaped in his image, each armed with a manreaper blade, which they brought to the ready.

A coven-conscript – his face a mask of odorous blood, his emerald jerkin torn into rags – crashed into the room as if kicked, collapsing to the floor. The Deathshroud advanced on the mewling human as a second figure entered.

Typhus. Once, the primarch would have considered the other warrior his oldest, closest friend, his trusted brother… But those days were long past. Now, Mortarion's relationship with his First Captain, the so-called Traveller, could only be described as *complex.*

A mist of miniscule flies buzzing about the horned growths at his back, Typhus gave a bow that was just on the right side of respectful. ***'My lord,'*** he rumbled. ***'News from the forward reaches.'*** He indicated the cowering helot. ***'The probing attacks on the fortress at Marmax have stalled. They have been beaten back.'***

Mortarion's sinews stiffened. Retreat, and notions allied to it, were not something that his Death Guard readily indulged. ***'My orders were to advance, only advance. Until attrition or victory.'***

'Yes.' Typhus nodded again. ***'And yet…'*** He gestured at the coven-conscript, who had prostrated himself on the deck, begging for his life. ***'This one fled the line. He*** **survived.'** The Traveller turned the last word

into a savage insult.

‘Who defends this bastion?’ Mortarion waved away his praetorians, advancing towards the First Captain. ***‘The Warmaster’s prognosticae spoke only of human soldiers garrisoned there.’***

Typhus kicked the conscript. ***‘Answer your master’s question.’***

‘Fighters!’ The trembling man stared at the deck, too afraid to meet the gaze of the hulking figures around him. ‘Can’t beat them, never defeat them, too strong, too wilful, they don’t break, won’t break…’

‘Impossible,’ said Mortarion. ***‘Not against the numbers I dispatched.’***

‘And yet…’ repeated Typhus, with a curl of his lip.

‘Explain!’ The primarch growled the demand, but the conscript could only babble, his nerve breaking.

‘Ah, no,’ Typhus grunted. ***‘His terror has snapped his mind. We’ll get little sense from him now of what happened up there.’***

‘Intelligence can be gleaned in other ways,’ said Mortarion. He reached down and grabbed the man by his throat, hauling him off the floor. The primarch placed the fingers of his other hand around the conscript’s shaven pate. Before his victim could protest, he squeezed hard enough to crack the man’s skull. Carefully, forcefully, he broke the bones without crushing the delicate grey matter within.

The convict was still alive when Mortarion opened his head with a sickle-bladed execution knife, revealing the pulpy corpus of his brain. With surgical dexterity, the primarch reached in and found the man’s hippocampus, deep amid the whorled mass. As the body collapsed, the Death Lord consumed the piece of brain matter in a single swallow.

Within moments, the omophagea node in Mortarion’s chest dissolved it, the arcane bio-processes in the artificial organ separating out the chemical chains of memory until he could smell them in his nostrils like the content of the spent censer.

He closed his eyes and concentrated, listening to recollections that were not his own.

Let it die, came a whisper, *let it die.* To his surprise, the words were not from his thoughts but from those of the dead man. Whatever power spoke to Mortarion in those quiet moments, it also talked to the conscript. Perhaps to all touched by the Grandfather’s Mark, he mused.

He concentrated on what he needed, separating it from the chaff of trivia

that formed much of the dead man’s life.

Then, entering the blurred memory-dream of the attack on Marmax, he was inside the tiny confines of the little human’s limited body, sensing echoes of elation and mad fury, ghosts of abject terror and bloodlust. Roaring guns, screaming attackers, crashing stone. It was a wild deluge, like viewing a hololith through a torrential downpour, but Mortarion had done this before, and he knew what to look for.

The potency of the consumed memory was already starting to fade, and so the primarch pressed deeper. *Let it die,* said the whispers.

Light blazed at the edge of the recollection – not a physical illumination, but a figurative, subjective one. Through the eyes of the dead man, Mortarion saw the moment that had sent him running, panicking.

A line of common troopers firing in his direction, each one of them with a face lit by dogged defiance; and among them, unarmed, almost unnoticed, a woman kneeling. Speaking.

What was she saying? The fading memory did not hold that recollection, but it had captured something vital – something that the dead man could sense by instinct but not articulate with words, like an animal unconsciously catching the scent of fear.

Mortarion knew, however. In the forbidden books he had read, in the prohibited works he had absorbed, in the partnership he had made with the Grandfather, his understanding had grown to encompass such knowledge.

Witchery.

There was an aura-light around the woman that could not be seen, as if she were a prism through which a far more potent psyche had granted some of its power. That invisible light touched the humans around her, gave them strength and made them bold.

She intrigued him. That potential crackling through her blood was a priceless thing, rare and rich. He could only wonder at what nourishment it might bring if gifted to the Grandfather.

Let it die, said the whispers.

The memory faded to nothing, and Mortarion’s last impression of the man he had killed was the sensation of hot blood running in streams over his hands.

He blinked back to awareness, to find Typhus watching him expectantly. ***‘Did that illuminate you, my lord? Your taste for learning was sated?’***

‘I saw enough,’ he replied, turning away. ***‘We will continue with the pace of our advance as planned.’***

The Traveller remained where he was, ignoring the dismissal implicit in his primarch’s tone. ***‘Must we? The Legion marches at the speed of its slowest element, and for what account? We could be at Marmax in hours. Instead, we slowly pick our way through ruins while our enemies regroup on the horizon.’***

Typhus was eager for battle, and he had made no secret of how he chafed at the primarch’s measured advance. He and his company would have cut away and prosecuted their own invasion, if Mortarion had not forbade it.

‘We will wet our blades in good time.’ Mortarion touched the edge of his war-scythe. ***‘Patience, Calas.*** **Patience.’**

The use of his old forename drew a grimace from the Traveller. ***‘Would we move at so leisurely a pace if I told you that our scry-scouts have sighted the Sigillite’s agents in neighbouring sectors? Knights Errant, my lord. The warriors in grey.’***

‘You should have led with that,’ Mortarion retorted irritably. ***‘How did this information come?’***

‘From a blight drone,’ replied Typhus. ***‘Before it perished, it captured an impression of an old friend. The traitor of the*** **Eisenstein.’**

Garro. The whisper gave him the name, and a tremor of cold amusement unfolded in the primarch’s chest. *If he is here, then he has come for the woman of the light. There can be no other reason.*

Mortarion gave a racking, dust-dry snort. For days now, he had felt the threefold hand of the Grandfather guiding him, directing him towards the faint aura flickering atop the bastion, to the light of something so pure amid so much horror that it shone like a beacon. Now came this news, the presence of the traitor, confirming what he knew to be true. It had to be fate, he decided, the Grandfather moving over events to bring them to pass.

An opportunity was here, a chance to take all these prizes at once. To obliterate Marmax and capture the woman in the memory, so her blood could be water to Nurgle’s gardens; and to rid the galaxy of the oath-breaker Garro, by the little-death of his submission, or the greater of his murder.

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INTERVAL I

The starship Endurance: before Isstvan

‘What answer do you expect of him, my lord?’ Typhon posed the question with deceptively little weight.

Mortarion considered his reply as they marched along the corridors of his flagship, his Deathshroud praetorians at his side. All about them, the warriors of the Death Guard were at their stations or setting to their preparations for the attack on the planets of the Isstvan System.

How many of them sensed the import of what was going to come, of the great upheaval that would begin on those inconsequential little worlds? How many were invested in Horus Lupercal’s great plans for rebellion, and the changed galaxy that it would create?

When the moment came, when Mortarion gave the fateful order to open fire on the other Legions, how many of his sons would pull the trigger? Not out of their own intent or understanding, but because they were *commanded*

to do so?

Will they do it because they are tools? *Or because they* understand *this?*

Mortarion released a breath. ‘What do I expect, kinsman?’ He glanced back at the First Captain, who feigned a casual smile. ‘I expect to find the truth.’

Typhon’s expression stiffened, and he halted. ‘But why him? There are others who are unswerving, loyal legionaries to which the question of obedience does need not be asked. Grulgor. Kalgaro. Crosius. And more.’

‘That is exactly *why* I need to know Nathaniel Garro’s mind,’ he replied, pausing beside an oval viewport. ‘Because the battle-captain is fiercely independent of action and impetus. Because he rejected membership in the Davinite lodges…’

‘Because he is Terran-born, and not a child of Barbarus?’ Typhon cocked his head and absently fingered his dark beard.

‘That too.’ Mortarion gave a nod. ‘He is respected, not just by his men and by other company captains, but by warriors in our sibling Legions. Garro’s stance on what will come to pass on Isstvan is a bellwether. If he agrees to it…’

‘Aye, if a warrior as loyal as “Straight-Arrow Garro” would bow to the insurrection, then who could argue its necessity?’

‘Just so.’ Mortarion turned to move on, but Typhon had more to say.

‘You know he will never take a stand against the Emperor. Garro will never turn his back on the Throne.’

‘Perhaps. But I will not dismiss a warrior of note without due consideration.’

‘You are too fond of him.’ Typhon sniffed. ‘If I were commanding the Legion, the matter would have already been dispatched.’

Mortarion eyed his old friend from the depths of his hooded robes and his tone sharpened to a razor edge. ‘But you are not, Calas. And the choice is not yours to make. If you wish to retain your post as captain of my First Company, you should remember that.’ They began to walk again.

‘I meant no disrespect,’ Typhon said quietly. ‘But I believe we will have to kill him. Garro will not turn.’

At length, the primarch gave a nod, reluctantly accepting the possibility. ‘If it needs to be done… have the brute Grulgor see to it. But only on my word.’

They found Garro with his men, and on the primarch's arrival, the battle-captain and his command squad went to their knees before their liege-lord and the First Captain.

Mortarion bid the legionary to his feet. 'Stand, Nathaniel, please. It becomes tiresome to look down upon my men.'

The faintest hint of doubt and uncertainty lurked in the warrior's eyes as he stood, but to his credit the battle-captain did not flinch from his gene-sire's searching, measuring gaze.

Mortarion smiled thinly. 'You ought to watch your step, Typhon. This one, he'll have your job one day.'

Still chastened from his primarch's earlier censure, Typhon said nothing, remaining as silent as the voiceless Deathshroud.

Garro took a breath. 'Lord, what service may the Seventh Company do for you?'

'Their captain may step forward,' said Mortarion. 'He has earned a reward.'

The moment of confusion on the battle-captain's face was brief. 'Sire, I deserve no special–'

Typhon spoke over him before he could finish the thought. 'That is not a refusal forming upon your lips, is it, captain? Such false modesty is unwelcome.'

'I am merely a servant of the Emperor.' Garro bristled. 'That is honour enough.'

Mortarion felt Typhon's gaze on him, and his words unspoken. *You see? Garro will never turn his back on the Throne.*

He pushed that thought aside and beckoned to a Legion servitor lurking close by. As it ambled forward, a tray of containers held before it, he addressed Garro again. 'Then instead, Nathaniel, might you honour me by sharing my drink?'

The men called them *the cups;* it was not anything as archaic as a ritual, not so rigid an act as that. Just a gesture shared between warriors of the Death Guard, a small way to toast their indefatigable nature and reaffirm the concord of the XIV Legion.

The reputation of Mortarion's sons was one of obdurate strength and unbreakable endurance – their repute carried before them, the vow that no obstacle, no toxin, no venom could stop them in their tracks. This truth had

been born in the poison fogs of Mortarion's adoptive home world and spread to every corner of the Death Guard's campaigns, on worlds so hostile and toxic that no other Legion would dare to face them.

With the cups, they proved that truth over again. In the echo of a gesture that he himself had begun on Barbarus, in the aftermath of any engagement where Mortarion participated, he would select warriors and share a drink.

But not ale, wine or amasec. The draught would be of poison.

The servitor finished the work of mixing the chemicals and poured measures of the lethal brew into three plain metal cups. Mortarion took the first, the second he gave to Typhon and the third he placed in Garro's open hand. The battle-captain studied the mixture dubiously, catching the molecular scents of the cocktail of toxins.

'Against death,' said the primarch, saluting with the cup. He drank the contents in a single, long pull. The fire of the poisons bit into Mortarion's body and he savoured the blood-rush as they warred with his enhanced physiology. It made him feel *alive.*

Typhon followed suit, never one to be seen to show reticence, but even he could not drink as swiftly as Mortarion had. Then Garro warily repeated the salute and drank as deeply as he dared. For a moment, the battle-captain's colour rose and the primarch wondered if he had gone too far; but Garro held his own, fighting the response of his flesh, *enduring* as only a Death Guard could.

Mortarion could not resist a cold smile, pleased by the display of fortitude. 'A rare and fine vintage, would you not agree?' Garro could only nod, the savage burn of the toxins temporarily robbing him of the ability to speak. At length, the primarch put a hand on the legionary's back. 'Come, Nathaniel,' he said, dismissing the others with a nod. 'Let's walk it off.'

They paused at a balcony above one of the *Endurance*'s vast loading bays, where several of the Death Guard's companies were staging for the drop on Isstvan. Mortarion studied them grimly. These sons of his were doomed to a sacrifice that they had no idea was coming, and although their deaths were a regrettable cost of the rebellion to come, he did not weigh the cost cheaply.

What Mortarion was about to do would alter the course of his Legion's future forever. Old oaths sworn and given would be shattered beyond repair. *Some will call us traitors,* he thought, *and they may be right.*

He glanced at Garro, considering what the battle-captain would say if he were to reveal the whole of the truth to him. How would he react to word of Horus' sundering?

'You are a respected man,' Mortarion noted. 'There's not a captain in the whole of the Legion who would not acknowledge your combat prowess… Even Commander Grulgor, although he may hate to admit it.' Garro reluctantly accepted the words of praise as his liege-lord went on. 'The men trust you. They look to you for strength of character, for leadership, and you give it.'

Garro's discomfort grew distinct. 'I do only what the Emperor commands of me, sire,' he said, after a moment.

Of course he does. Once more, Mortarion felt the ghost of Typhon's warning in his thoughts.

'It is important to me to have unity of purpose within my Legion,' insisted the primarch, 'just as it is important for my brother Horus to have unity across the entirety of the Legiones Astartes.' Carefully, he probed for the response he wanted, searching for some possibility that Garro might choose Legion over Throne when the ultimate moment arrived. 'The Death Guard must be of one mind,' he went on. 'We must have singular purpose or we will falter.'

Affirm your loyalty to me. Mortarion stared into Garro's eyes, willing him to make the vow anew. But the words he sought to hear remained unspoken.

Perhaps Typhon was right, perhaps the primarch did grant the battle-captain more latitude than he deserved. But Garro represented something that Mortarion wanted to hold fast within the Death Guard, no matter whose banner they marched under.

Honour. A simple quality at its heart, but one many were hard-pressed to retain.

He posed a question to the warrior, about the Davinite lodges, and in the reply Mortarion finally saw that what he hoped for was not there.

'We are set on our path by the Master of Mankind,' said Garro. 'Tasked to regather the lost fragments of humanity to the fold of the Imperium, to illuminate the lost, castigate the fallen and the invader. We can only do so if we have truth on our side. If we do it in the open, under the harsh light of the universe, then I have no doubt that we will eventually expunge the fallacies of gods and deities… But we cannot bring the secular truth to bear

if any of it is hidden, even the smallest part. Only the Emperor can show the way forward.’

Garro will not turn. Typhon’s voice was as clear to Mortarion as it would have been if the First Captain had been standing at his side. *We will have to kill him.*

So be it. The primarch made his choice and covered it with a nod. ‘Thank you for your candour, battle-captain. I expected nothing less.’

Garro nodded, believing that he was in receipt of an honour in this moment, unaware that his words would be his death warrant.

I will keep him close, Mortarion decided, *and with that, learn the faces of any others among my sons who share his sentiments. And when the moment comes…*

…Nathaniel Garro will die for his Emperor.

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THREE

Duty & Love

Attack Warning

Helbrute

Although it was technically classed as a single level of the Marmax Bastion, it would have been wrong to name the Dilectio Tier a ‘floor’ of a particular building, as if it were the upper storey on some ordinary hab-construct. The footprint of the tier, if set out on the grid of the Palace-city beneath it, would have encompassed several metropolitan blocks. It had its own independent power core, a landing pad cupola, operations centre and dozens of barrack quads – although many of these were empty, their population thinned by the constant attacks.

As such, Garro saw that Euphrati Keeler had plenty of space to call her own in the chambers Captain Kostagar had granted to her. Keeler’s rooms were off the main corridor nexus of the tier, and she explained that being there made it easier for the soldiers of the Auxilia to come and find her when they wished to talk.

Garro looked around, taking in the space, the low ceiling and the heavy

stone walls. Electro-candles burned here and there, casting a warm light, and in one corner he spotted a familiar bundle of bound pages printed in crimson ink, lying in an open crate. His own copy of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*, bequeathed to him by his long-dead housecarl Kaleb, was rolled tightly in one of the pouch-packs affixed to his wargear. He had not considered it for some time.

Across from a hammock, there were several empty chairs around a makeshift table made from another storage box, and a battered old auto-samovar that could have made black tea for fifty people. The rooms might have been a place for Keeler to lay her head, but they were more than that.

'This feels familiar,' Garro noted, gesturing around. 'Another place, but the same scenario. Are we destined to repeat events, you and I? Perhaps this is the Emperor's influence on the path of our lives, drawing us into the same circles?'

She shook her head. 'This isn't like it was at the chapel on Hesperides.'

Then, in a secret church on the orbital plate above Terra, Keeler had been actively spreading the word of the God-Emperor's divinity. She had done so with such vigour that it made her the target of a cursed Assassin sent by the Warmaster himself. Garro had killed that man before he could fulfil his mission, but to this day he still felt as if he hadn't protected Keeler well enough.

'I don't preach here,' she went on. 'I don't even read the…' The woman nodded towards the papers in the crate, without finishing the thought. 'It is enough for me to just… Just *be*.'

Garro frowned at that and sighed, suddenly as weary as if he carried the weight of the world. 'What are you doing, Euphrati?'

Keeler smiled faintly. 'Whatever I can, Nathaniel.'

Garro grew a scowl. 'Don't be glib, it doesn't suit you.'

She laughed. 'If you believe that, then you may not know me as well as you think.' She wandered to where her old, dented picter lay in the hammock, and toyed with the device. 'Once, I was renowned for it.'

He ignored her attempt at deflection. 'When last we met, I begged you to leave Terra, but you insisted on remaining. If you had accepted my counsel then, you would be light years away now.'

'And *safe?* Is that what you were going to say?' Keeler shook her head. 'Do you think anywhere in the galaxy will be safe until this is over? And

even then, if the Warmaster is defeated?'

'Horus *will* die,' Garro insisted. 'And the iterator, Sindermann… He could remain in your stead.'

'Kyril has his own work to do,' she countered. 'His path was never mine to choose for him.'

At length, Garro went to the crate and picked up the battered copy of the *Lectitio Divinitatus*. 'The word of this… It needs a light, a voice to guide it. We both know what happens when there isn't one to keep the seekers on the true path. And you are the light, Euphrati. If you go in harm's way, you put that in jeopardy!'

'You're wrong,' she shot back. 'I am keeping the word alive, in the only way I can!'

'By needlessly risking your life?' Garro's voice rose, and he caught himself before it became a shout.

Keeler's tone was wounded. 'Is that why you are here, old friend? To say *I told you so?* That does not suit *you.*'

Garro stared down at the book, frustration and duty and a dozen other sentiments warring within him. He turned the pages, briefly losing himself in the action, and the silence between them lengthened.

When he spoke again, he took a different tack. 'Do you remember the gallery you showed me, that day on the Hesperides plate?'

Keeler nodded, clasping the picter. Alone with Garro, she had presented the legionary with still images captured by the device, but each one was of a possible future where she would perish. There had been countless variations, but only one where Keeler lived – the one where Garro watched over her.

She nodded in the direction of the corridor. 'You can see the Byzant Minaret from the battlements up here.' The slender tower was the setting for one of the death-images, Garro recalled, in which Keeler's end came at the point of a sword. 'Well,' she corrected, 'the ruins of it, at least.'

'I know,' said Garro. 'I was there when it was destroyed. I confess I was relieved to see it crumble. That meant one less ill fate that might come to pass.'

'I meant what I said,' she said. 'The Sigillite drew an oath from me, and from Kyril, and the rest of us. We cannot preach… So I found another way to help. It is for the best.'

Garro studied her, seeing the micro-expressions and subtle tells that only a transhuman could have detected. ‘Do not hold back from me,’ he said gently, cutting to the truth of it. ‘I know you mean what you say, but I can see the doubt in you.’ Keeler opened her mouth to speak but he held up a hand, finishing his thought. ‘I know it, because I have also known that uncertainty. You helped me find my way past it.’

‘I refused to hide in some dungeon chamber in the Blackstone,’ she told him. ‘Yes, I have my misgivings, but I knew I could do more out in the world. I felt it in my bones. I could no more sit aside while this siege rages than you have.’

‘Yet you are still uncertain as to what lies at the end of your road.’

She glanced up at him. ‘When did you get to be so perceptive, battle-captain?’

‘It’s how I was made,’ he admitted.

Keeler sighed. ‘Is it odd to say that among this madness, the fighting and bloodshed, I found a kind of peace?’ She shook her head. ‘Don’t answer that. But I tell you, the acts of walking the corridors, talking to the troopers holding the line… I found myself exploring my own questions about the nature of the God-Emperor as well as theirs. And in doing so, they were inspired by me. I didn’t mean for it to happen. But if less of them die when they hear my voice, if I give them something like faith to hold on to… How can that be a bad thing?’

‘You would not ask that question if you were certain of the answer.’

‘No. I suppose not.’ She broke his gaze and looked away. ‘There is an irony to this, don’t you think? Our roles are reversed, Nathaniel. Once you were the one seeking guidance, but now it is I who searches for it.’

‘If that is so, then let me illuminate you.’ He put down the booklet and crossed to her side. She seemed so small and fragile in the candle-glow, but Garro knew that was a misconception. Euphrati Keeler had a reserve of inner strength greater than many warriors of his experience. ‘Think of the good you can do, the inspiration you can give, if only you live beyond this day, beyond the reach of this damnable heresy.’ He reached out and took her hand, enveloping the woman’s slender fingers in his great ceramite gauntlet. ‘The danger you have placed yourself in, in this citadel… It is too grave. In any other soul I might think the act was a death wish! You are too important to risk yourself for such a small and inconsequential battle as this

one, for just the lives of Kostagar and her meagre force of troopers. The good captain would say the same, if only you asked her.'

'No…' Keeler shook her head, and pulled her hand from his grasp. 'How can you say that to me?' A new fire burned in her eyes. 'None of these battles are inconsequential. You shouldn't be so fixated on some idealised path to destiny that you lose sight of what you are fighting for! This entire bloody insurrection was born out of that kind of short-sightedness!' She put her hand, fingers spread, on the breastplate of Garro's armoured cuirass. 'However the trappings of it may appear, this conflict burning about us? It's not for the God-Emperor, not for His primarch sons or even for your brother Legions. It's for the common folk of the Imperium, the ones who have the most to lose! People like Maed and her troopers. Tell me you still see that, Nathaniel. *Please.*'

He held his silence, weighing his words before he replied. 'I… see it.' But for a moment, he had not. It was easy to lose perspective in a war so vast it had set the galaxy aflame. 'There is truth in your words,' he went on, 'but never forget that I am unlike you. I am a warrior of the Legiones Astartes, and I was bred to instil fear and awe. My kind cannot engender what you do. Faith. *Love.*' Garro shook his head. 'A speaker, a saint… She can inspire. But ultimately, a legionary is only a creature of martial duty… And my duty is to preserve your life at any cost.'

'Even if it is against my wishes?'

'Even if.' He gave a wan smile. 'You once told me I would save you, Euphrati. Please, let me do that.'

'You will,' she said firmly. 'It is not quite time yet. But soon. Very soon.'

Garro took a breath to form another question, but before he could utter a word, a clanging alarm bell sounded down the corridors.

'The attack warning,' said Keeler. 'The heretics have returned.'

'Throne and blood.' Gallor watched the colour drain from Captain Kostagar's face as she stared through her monocular, into the army of figures beneath the oncoming mass of war-smoke. 'There's so many of them… I can't even begin the count.'

Gallor nodded gravely. 'They've picked up the pace. The main elements of the Death Guard advance will enter attack range within an hour. I'll warrant their vanguard will be here in minutes.'

She frowned. ‘I don’t see the Titans. I had expected their bombardment…’

‘That is not the Death Guard way,’ he noted. ‘The war machines will hold off in case heavy fire is required. The attacks to come will be ones of attrition, fought close and hard. They will want to see your faces when you die.’ He ventured to the edge of the battlements and looked down. Shapes moved in the haze, but he couldn’t register anything more than vague forms. ‘Now would be the time for you to commit any reinforcements, captain.’

Kostagar gave him a shocked look and a bark of incredulous laughter. ‘Are you new to this battle, legionary? We *were* the reinforcements. No one else will be coming.’ She waved in the direction of the other distant bastions lined up past Marmax, disappearing into the far reaches. ‘Each of these fortresses is an island unto itself. We are all that is left of this one’s populace.’ She lifted the monocular again, scanning the enemy lines.

‘Then, with respect, perhaps it is time to withdraw.’ Gallor checked his boltgun, his nerves tingling with a pre-sense of imminent violence.

As a former warrior of the XIV Legion, he knew their tactical doctrines by heart. The initial probing attacks were over, and the next strike would be a reconnaissance-in-force. After that would come what the sons of Barbarus called *the march* – the steady, inexorable movement of their lethal infantry advance, rolling over all resistance, grinding it brutally beneath their boots.

‘My orders were to hold,’ Kostagar replied, clutching what defiance she still had. ‘And I will, until I… Until…’ She faltered as she saw something through the monocular. Her expression shifted again, towards abject fear and cold revulsion. ‘What in the name of blades is that?’ Horror marbled every word she uttered.

Kostagar pointed at a war-barge moving through the Palace-city’s rubble-choked boulevards, far off in the middle of the main Death Guard force. Atop the corroded, copper-green prow of the vessel, figures were visible amid a cloud of drifting, swirling black motes. One was tall, lost in the shadows of a dark cloak; the other was hulking and bloated. An aura of ghastly menace surrounded them.

Gallor didn’t need to see their ruined faces. He knew their names.

‘He is here,’ said the legionary, but his words were for his kinsman, as Garro approached from behind. ‘Mortarion has come. And Typhon’s with

him.’

‘It is said he calls himself *Typhus* now,’ said Garro, moving to stand alongside. ‘He always was… twisted inside. Now his outer aspect mirrors his true nature.’

Kostagar let the monocular drop. ‘That… that’s a primarch. One of the changed ones.’

‘Aye,’ said Gallor.

She nodded, staring at the stones at her feet. Sweat dripped off her face, and Gallor frowned. He had seen this in common folk before – the shock-effect of facing a post-human being, of grasping that abrupt realisation of what the Emperor’s sons really were, and of what they were capable.

But this was worse, for what Kostagar saw down there was a corrupted version of that, an engineered demigod transformed into something monstrous. Something *daemonic*.

‘After due consideration,’ said the captain, ‘I’ve decided to re-evaluate the orders I was given–’

Heat like the heart of a star obliterated the woman before she could finish the thought. Propelled by preternaturally fast reflexes, Gallor and Garro were already in motion as the sun-fire pulse of the enemy plasma cannon screamed in, diving away from the strike point.

But Maed Kostagar never saw her death coming. The plasmatic blast ate a hemisphere of stone out of the battlements, turning ferrocrete blocks into acidic vapour, heating others around it to the point of brittle fracture. Fires started everywhere there was something combustible, and troopers screamed as their uniforms caught alight and their carapace armour melted like wax.

The smallest mercy was that Kostagar would not have felt any pain, likely would not even have known she was dying – the violent force of the plasma blast reduced her to atoms faster than her nerves would have registered it. But now a good soldier was dead and her people were in disarray.

Gallor lurched back to the seething heat of the broken battlements and saw the massive, bloated shape of the captain’s killer, rising before a horde of screaming outcasts.

It resembled a venerable Dreadnought of the Legion, but only in the broadest of ways. Swollen and overlarge, the bipedal mutant was a fusion of corroded armour plating and oozing, ashen skin. Thick wattles of diseased,

reeking flesh protruded from around the edges of the rust-caked metal, as if the heavy plates were barely able to keep the organic matter inside from bursting out into the air.

One entire arm of the bestial thing was the bulbous plasma cannon that had erased Kostagar from the world, jets of superheated steam shrieking from coolant vents down the serrated length of the glowing barrel. Where the other arm should have been, there was a writhing nest of slime-coated tentacles, each as thick as the torso of a human. Some of these were anchored in the sloping side of the bastion's outer wall, allowing the creature to make the slow climb upward, and others whipped at the air, showing hook-toothed maws at their tips.

The hulk had no head, only a torn orifice in the centre of its chest where ropes of rotting epidermis had been peeled back and nailed in place. In the hole there was a face made of dozens of maddened, rheumy eyes that rolled to show yellowed whites, above a flapping skeleton jaw that opened and closed like the working of a mantrap.

'*Helbrute.*' Garro named the thing with a sneer of disgust. 'The Death Lord has sent one of his accursed to destroy us.'

'It won't die cleanly,' said Gallor, as the creature crashed upward over the fortress' steep incline, knocking aside the outcasts at its feet in its eagerness.

'But it *will* die,' Garro noted. He raised his gun – an exemplary model of a master-crafted Paragon bolter – and fired into the Helbrute's hide. The whistling cadence of Kraken rounds sliced through the air and Gallor drew his pistol, snapping off a cluster of shots in the direction of the monster's torso.

Orange sparks flared off the Helbrute's armour, but it showed no signs of slowing its climb. Both the legionaries knew that they could not allow the thing to reach the Dilectio Tier. In the confines of the corridors, it would kill everything that drew breath.

Gallor found the nearest of the Army troopers who still showed some degree of clarity and gestured down the line. 'Kostagar is dead, you are in command now. Muster the men, concentrate your fire on the outcasts.'

'B-but that… that *thing!*' The young man's eyes were wide with abject terror.

'Is our concern,' Gallor said bluntly. 'Do as I say. We'll avenge your

captain, aye?’

‘Aye.’ The trooper stiffened as he accepted his new burden, and Gallor turned away.

Garro handed him a magnetic disc attached to a length of heavy-duty polymer cable. The cable ran to a reel set into the stonework of the battlements, and the other legionary had already locked another to a tether point on his backpack. ‘Ready to take a stroll, Helig?’

Gallor accepted the disc and locked on himself. Similar mechanisms were often deployed in null-grav environments, safety lines that would keep fighters from drifting off into the void. Here, the cables allowed defenders to descend along the steeply angled sides of the Marmax Bastion without fear of falling to their deaths.

‘Guns only,’ added Garro. ‘We cannot chance the use of blades… A single ill-judged sword swing could cut our cables, and I have no desire to plummet to the ground below.’

Another plasmatic blast screamed through the air, lashing the battlements with flame, and Gallor banged his mailed fist on Garro’s shoulder pauldron. ‘Go now!’

The Helbrute weapon’s powerful release was brutal, but it ran hot and the recharge cycle was long. In the pause between shots, the two Knights Errant threw themselves over the edge of the fortifications, sparks rising as they dug in the heels of their ceramite boots and the fingertips of their gauntlets to slow their descent.

Gallor felt the tug of the cable at his back, heard the buzz of the line reeling out. Raising his bolt pistol again, he paced rounds up the Helbrute’s torso, aiming for the eye-cluster.

Around him, streaks of laser fire fell in a deadly rain as the troopers on the line opened up on the chattering outcasts. The Helbrute rocked back and emitted a reedy scream, exhaling a noxious breath that curdled the air about it.

Dangling precariously over the dizzying drop, the legionaries kept up their own salvo of bolt shells, but the monster brought up its tentacles to cover its torso with the thick bulk of greasy flesh. Impacts tore out chunks of sizzling meat, leaving gaping wounds oozing chalky pus, but the hits did little to slow the thing’s advance.

Garro pulled on his cable, reeling back and swinging wide as the Helbrute

lit off another shrieking plasma bolt. This one slashed horizontally across the bastion's stonework, carving a blackened furrow through the ouslite cladding. Across the slope, the slide on Gallor's pistol snapped open as he expended the last round in the magazine. He bared his teeth in annoyance as he slammed a fresh load into place. The Helbrute soaked up every hit they landed on it, and the thing never lost a step. Guns would not be enough to stop it. A more radical approach was required.

Gallor jammed his pistol back in its holster and pulled his combat knife instead, turning it in his fist. Garro caught sight of light flashing off the weapon's monomolecular edge, and called out, 'What are you doing? I said no blades–'

'I know what you said,' Gallor snapped back. 'Cover me.' He flicked the knife backwards and cut his own tether. Gravity snatched at him and the warrior dropped like a stone, sending up sheets of sparks as his armour scraped down the side of the fortress exterior.

'Fool!' He heard Garro shout the word at his back, but still the battle-captain did as he was asked, bracketing his comrade with heavy fire.

At the last second, Gallor kicked off and launched himself directly at the Helbrute. He collided with the creature, leading with the blade, stabbing wildly at its exposed flesh.

The monster screeched and rocked back, but its clawed feet held firm, metre-long iron talons digging deep into the stone. Gallor took off the tips of thrashing tentacles whipping at his back, sending gushes of foetid blood sluicing into the lower tiers. He grabbed fistfuls of sallow, doughy meat and ripped them away. The Helbrute writhed, trying to shake him off, and when it couldn't, the beast clubbed him with the massive barrel of the plasma cannon.

Gallor saw a ball of light building in the weapon's pre-fire chamber, and the air around it shuddered in a heat haze – but then more shots from Garro's Paragon clipped the steaming coolant pipes and mechanisms feeding the cannon.

The Helbrute let off a premature shot from the plasma weapon, a catastrophic misfire that ripped open the emitter muzzle and sent particles of bone and fulgurite glass into the air. Gallor pressed himself into the fortress wall to duck the inferno, but even at a fraction of full power, the blast boiled off shreds of his wargear's outer shell. The fire exposed the

muscle fibres and power train of the armour beneath, and cooked the warrior’s flesh within.

Wounded and enraged, the Helbrute sent its writhing appendages snaking around him, trying to hold him down. The trapdoor mouth opened in a ululating scream, and it brought the broken end of the plasma cannon down on his chest.

Glowing blinding white, the shattered maw of the useless gun was still hot enough to melt ceramite, and with a crackling hiss, the Helbrute drove it through the layers of Gallor’s chestplate and into the meat of him.

The legionary let out a cry of agony as sub-modules of his wargear went offline and the infernal heat enveloped him, boiling the blood in his veins. Unlike poor Kostagar, Gallor would be made to feel every moment of his burning end.

Dimly, he was aware of Garro crying out to him, but the screaming from the Helbrute’s broken-toothed maw drowned out the words.

If I am to perish, then this abomination comes with me. Gallor grabbed blindly for a cluster of knurled cylinders dangling from his belt, fingers closing around them.

He ripped the krak grenades free, the arming pins spinning away, and with a yell, the legionary rammed the devices into the orifice of the Helbrute’s face.

The creature reacted, releasing its grip on Gallor as it tried desperately to pull the grenades from where they had lodged. To his dismay, Gallor’s armour responded jerkily to his movements, malfunctioning around him as he began to slide towards the sheer drop.

A heavy shape blurred past him on the end of a whickering cable, and Gallor was suddenly moving across the fortress walls instead of down. Garro had him in his iron grip, pulling the other legionary away.

Behind them, the krak grenades went off in a ripple of thunder and the Helbrute came apart, the discharge smothering its cohort of outcasts in ashes and fire. A toxic wash of acidic blood steamed in the light falling from the great aegis far above, and in the lull that followed, Gallor heard the cheers of Kostagar’s troopers and the creaking of strained cable. With only a few degrees of motion in the fused joints of his armour, he could only tense himself against the storm of pain in his flesh, as his bio-implants fought the damage within him.

‘Fool,’ Garro repeated, shifting his position to take Gallor’s weight. Moving hand over hand, he began the slow process of climbing back up the slope towards the Dilectio Tier. ‘It almost killed you.’

‘Almost,’ admitted Gallor, wheezing out the words as his body forced him into a healing trance. ‘Perhaps the next one our gene-sire sends… will be more of a challenge.’

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Garro is reunited with Keeler.

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FOUR

The Fate We Choose

No Turning Back

The Challenge

Another of the empty barracks in the core of the Dilectio Tier had been turned into a makeshift recovery space, and Greff – the trooper Gallor had summarily promoted into command of the defenders – had provided a medicae servitor for use by the Knights Errant.

For a while, Garro stood sentinel beside the angled support pallet where his brother-warrior lay silently. The helot tottered closer, using a manipulator to inject philtres and antigens into Gallor's neck, but in truth its help was hardly needed. Despite the horrible plasma burns the legionary had suffered, he was fully capable of healing himself, given time.

But that was a commodity no one had in surplus within the Marmax Bastion. On the tick of every minute, a salvo of laser bolts streaked into the flanks of the fortress, sending crashing shocks through the dense stone. Dust and debris trickled from the ceiling above as the Death Guard used their ranged weapons against the stronghold, forcing the defenders to

remain in cover or be atomised.

Mortarion could have ordered the macro-guns and nuclear launchers under his command to open up in an instant, had he truly wanted to wipe Marmax off the map; but that was not the tactic here. The invaders barraged the tiers to keep the troopers pinned in place while the real attack was being prepared.

There was little else to be done but wait, and so Garro was in the process of cleaning and reloading his Paragon bolter when Gallor suddenly jerked awake, twitching sharply enough to knock the doddering servitor off its iron feet.

The younger warrior's damaged features were briefly caught in a moment of shock as he looked down at the half-melted wreckage of his own battle armour.

'My wargear…' Gallor managed, his voice as dry as kindling.

'It was almost your coffin,' Garro explained, bringing him a canteen of water. 'I am sorry to say it is damaged beyond our capacity to fully repair, at least with any tools to hand in this place.' Gallor took the canteen and drank it dry as Garro went on. 'The plasma damaged the joints, destroyed the circuitry.'

The lasers hit again, and Gallor cocked his head, quietly assimilating the situation. 'Very well,' he said. He discarded the container and leaned up, rising unsteadily off the pallet where Garro had placed him. Leaked blood and processor fluids soaked the mattress where the warrior's genhanced body had gone into overdrive in order to keep him alive. He closed his eyes and Garro knew he was taking a mental inventory of the damage that had been done to him.

Neither needed to say it out loud. Gallor's risky ploy to kill the Helbrute had succeeded, but he had almost died in the attempt.

His eyes opened again. 'Thank you.' Gallor spoke quietly, grudgingly, and his tone made it clear he would not be open to criticism of his actions. 'How long have I been hibernative? What has transpired in that time?'

'Not long,' said Garro. 'Only hours. I think your mind refused to surrender fully to the healing trance. And as for the enemy…' He gestured at the dusty air and they both listened to the steady chorus of energy impacts.

Gallor nodded to himself, and he ran a hand over his head, tensing as he touched patches where the outer epidermis had been burned all the way

down to the nerve sheath, mentally shunting away the pain. ‘The next assault will be the one that breaks through.’

‘Likely,’ admitted Garro.

Gallor rose stiffly, and made a growling noise as he surveyed the damage wrought upon his ruined armour. ‘For a moment… when I awoke… I thought my spirit had been severed from my body.’ He shook his head. ‘Fanciful. The mind playing tricks upon me.’

‘You don’t consider such things possible?’

Gallor eyed him. ‘I’m not like you. I put no stock in the numinous.’

‘And yet you came to me with the news of Keeler. You came here. You almost died protecting her and… the *numinous* things she represents.’

‘Yes. It seems I am what you accused me of out there, captain. I am a fool.’ Before Garro could respond to that, the injured warrior took a juddering, limping step towards him. ‘You know they will all die, yes? When the march reaches us, every last one of the defenders will be massacred, even with Keeler’s inspiration to motivate them. Her words can’t protect them. The Emperor cannot protect them. Their only choices are retreat or perish.’ He paused. ‘And as for you and I… There is no question Mortarion will see us dead before he moves on from this place.’

From the gloom of his memories, a voice pushed out of Garro’s eidetic recall and echoed in his ears, as strong as if the man who had said the words were standing beside him.

He let me see. The Vindicare Assassin Eristede Kell, corrupted and dispatched by the Warmaster to kill Euphrati Keeler on the Hesperides plate, had spoken to him in the moments before Garro ended his life. *And I’ve seen you dead, Death Guard. Your heart broken and bleeding black.*

Kell’s utterance had the conviction of someone bereft of any doubt. Was it possible that Horus had somehow shown the Assassin a skein of the future where Garro’s life was forfeit? He looked at Gallor’s damaged flesh, at the black blood congealing on his body where the legionary’s bio-implants warred with his near-fatal injuries.

The question weighed him down. *Is it finally time?*

‘She can’t die here,’ Garro said quietly, then he repeated the statement with force. ‘She can’t die here! I will not allow it!’

‘But if Keeler refuses to leave–’

‘Are you whole enough to fight, Helig?’ Garro’s words were as fierce as

the roar of the lasguns, and he stared into the other warrior's eyes as he spoke.

'Always,' said Gallor, bristling at the challenge.

'I assumed as much.' Garro picked up the other warrior's bolter and pressed it into his hands. 'These are my commands: secure the landing cupola on the far side of the tier. There's a heavy cargo carrier in there that should still be airworthy. Strip it to the bulkheads and pack every last one of Kostagar's troopers inside, and Keeler with them. Take them to the Inner Palace, low and fast, beyond the range of the Titan guns. Take them somewhere safe.'

'Look around,' Gallor said sourly. '*Safe* is a relative term, kinsman.'

'Do as I say!'

Gallor grimaced. 'Suppose I agree to that. You know what will happen when Mortarion's spotters see the troopers abandoning their posts. They'll come in force, and swiftly with it. We both know the Death Guard can take the pace if they are motivated. That carrier won't make it off the pad.'

'Aye,' admitted Garro. 'So I will provide something else to occupy their attention.'

The younger warrior's scalded face twisted in a grimace as he caught Garro's meaning. 'You're not coming with us.'

'We go where we are needed.'

'You want me to… to run? While you stay back and sell your life like a cheap token?' Gallor was affronted by the suggestion. 'Where is the honour in that?'

'It is not a matter of honour. It is one of *need*.' Garro shook his head. 'I have no doubt you can fight, despite your injuries, but on this day I need a man I can trust, not a warrior.' He put a hand on Gallor's shoulder. 'You might not believe in what I do, but you believe in duty. And yours is to save Keeler and the other survivors.'

Gallor angrily shrugged him off. 'What do you think you will achieve? The great Battle-Captain Nathaniel Garro, the hand of the Sigillite, the hero of the *Eisenstein*, will single-handedly halt the Death Guard advance? Mortarion's guns will rip you to shreds in the blink of an eye! This is arrogance.. Nothing but fatalistic hubris!'

'I do have my pride, it must be said,' Garro countered. 'And I have no wish to die for nought. But today there is need. And we both know it.'

‘My words fall on deaf ears.’ Gallor stepped away. ‘You will do whatever you wish, no matter what argument I present. That has always been your way.’

‘I know my duty–’

‘An excuse!’ Gallor shot back. ‘You took the *Eisenstein* and ran for Terra, and said it was because of duty! Those of us on the ship, the Seventy, we had no say in it! And so we found ourselves orphaned sons, cut out from the Legion we called home. Because of a choice *you* made, Garro.’ Now he was bringing it into the open, the other legionary’s long-buried resentment could not be held back. ‘We were imprisoned on Luna because of you. Distrusted by our cousins in the other loyalist Legions, and named betrayers by our own. We lost all that we were because of your decision! And now you seek to make another grand gesture, the consequences of which you won’t live long enough to see!’

Garro stood in silence. The other loyal Death Guard who had come with him on his desperate race to carry warning of Horus’ betrayal, they had followed him because he was their commander. But in the time since that act, he had never dwelled on the question: had they *agreed* with his choice?

He had been arrogant, he realised, assuming they felt as he did.

‘If we had not fled the Dropsite Massacre at Isstvan,’ Garro began, ‘we would be dead… or turned. Is that what you wish for, Helig?’

Gallor took a shuddering breath. ‘We might have been able to stop Mortarion before he committed to the Warmaster’s perfidy, and the pacts he has made since. We could have…’

‘Changed his mind?’ Garro shook his head. ‘No. I wish that were so, but that point was too far gone. Typhon and that bastard Word Bearer Erebus made certain of that with their machinations. Only now, in retrospect, is it clear. We lost our Legion a long time before Isstvan. The rot was already there, but we did not see it.’ His remorse weighed heavily in his words. ‘Never forget, we are not the ones who sundered our oath. *We* are the only unbroken.’

‘And because of that, there is no place for us.’ Gallor’s ire faded, turning bitter as another rain of dust fell from the stonework above them.

‘You are mistaken.’ Garro stiffened. ‘My place is here, now. And yours? For the moment, it is with Keeler and the others. It will take a Knight Errant to get them through the aerial defence cordons to the Palace’s inner

dominions.’

‘You trade your life for theirs? You, a legionary. A warlord of the Emperor. For a handful of common soldiers and a woman reciting pretty words.’ Gallor scowled. ‘You know, I thought if I came here with you, I might understand you better. But I still don’t.’

‘The moment we value those people as less than us,’ Garro told him, ‘we take the first step down the path beaten by Horus. Keeler reminded me of that, and now I do the same for you.’ He let the silence hang for a moment, then spoke again. ‘I regret the circumstances that forced me to drag you and the others into this. I regret the deaths of those I called my battle-brothers… Tollen Sendek. Meric Voyen. Solun Decius. And the rest. But we *all* would have perished over Isstvan had we not fled the massacre. At least here on Terra, you and I can choose the manner of our own fates.’

‘There is little comfort in that,’ Gallor noted.

‘Agreed.’

At length, Gallor checked over his bolt pistol, gear packs and the few remaining krak grenades, making ready. ‘It vexes me that I must abandon you. It feels like a betrayal.’

‘That you live is all that matters,’ Garro told him. He reached into a pouch and found the booklet of folded pages within. ‘Here. I want you to take this.’

Gallor looked at the papers and raised an eyebrow. ‘I have no interest in that.’

‘This was bequeathed to me by a man named Kaleb Arin,’ Garro went on, weighing the dog-eared copy of the *Lectitio Divinitatus* in his hand. ‘He was my housecarl. An ordinary soul, but without doubt one of the most loyal and honourable men I have ever known. The words on these pages… They gave him guidance. They gave him purpose. It’s yours now.’

‘I have no interest,’ Gallor repeated, but Garro shook his head.

‘I am not asking you to believe,’ he said firmly. ‘Just read. And perhaps then, you will have the understanding that escapes you.’

For a moment, Garro thought the other warrior would turn his back, and the silence between them was filled by the keening of another laser barrage.

Then finally Gallor reached out and snatched the booklet from him. ‘I will consider it,’ he rumbled.

‘You’ve made your decision?’ The new voice came from the doorway

across the room, and both of them turned. A figure stood watching them; Garro was certain that Euphrati Keeler had not been there a moment before, certain his enhanced senses would have heard her approaching. Yet they had not.

'How long have you been listening?' said Gallor.

'Long enough to know what is intended.' She looked up at Garro. 'We don't have to leave, Nathaniel.'

'You know that is not so,' he countered.

'The Emperor protects,' said the woman. 'He has done it before, He will do it again.'

'You are right.' Garro drew himself up. 'The Emperor does protect. Through *me*.' He gestured at Gallor. 'Through *us*. It is why we are here.'

She blinked, and doubt darkened her face. 'You believe He sent you, is that it?'

When Garro spoke again, his voice dropped to a softer register. 'Euphrati… You are not naïve. You cannot believe you would survive a Death Guard assault.'

'She does not want to.' Gallor fixed Keeler with a hard, searching gaze. 'Do you see it, Garro? Staying here, in the path of the fighting, facing certain annihilation. It would take away the burden of the choice she must make. Free her from it.' He addressed her directly. 'But that is the way of a weak spirit, and you are not weak. The battle-captain would never venerate someone undeserving.'

A lone tear followed the curve of Keeler's cheek before falling to the flagstones at her feet. 'I… I cannot carry this burden any more. I am spiralling, falling, out of control. Can you know what it is like to be the one others look to for guidance, but to have none for yourself? Yes, I think you do.' She brought a balled fist to her chest. 'I am hollow inside. Every day, I give all that is in me… But the well runs dry. I am afraid I will become the echo instead of the voice.'

Garro went to her, and once again, he took her hand in his. 'Neither of us had a choice in the paths that destiny placed us on. But we cannot falter. We must go on, for the alternative is ruin and destruction. *You* taught me that, Euphrati.' He felt a swell of certainty in his chest, a renewal of his resolve – cold, strong and clear, like the waters of a mountain stream. 'I learned the lesson you imparted to me when I first came searching for you. Do you

remember what you told me?’

‘*You are of purpose.*’ She nodded. ‘The Emperor has a duty that only you can shoulder.’

‘And at last I see what that purpose is.’ Garro returned the nod. ‘Perhaps I can inspire as you do, in my own way, not with words but with this.’ He placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. ‘I see my path now, without obfuscation. From the core of my being, you have my thanks.’

Keeler looked away. ‘I wish I had your certainty, Nathaniel.’

‘You do,’ he told her. ‘You need only to rediscover it. Helig will make certain you have the time you need to do so.’

Garro turned back to the other legionary and offered his hand. Gallor took it and they clasped each other’s vambraces, the ceramite of their gauntlets clanking as they met in the martial gesture.

‘I will not wish you good fortune,’ said the younger warrior. ‘Those words would be… disrespectful. I will only say this – if you are to walk the martyr’s path, then fight well, battle-captain.’

‘We are legionaries,’ Garro replied. ‘That is what we were made to do.’

He began to stride away, but Keeler reached out and grasped his hand once again. ‘I don’t want this,’ she said, swallowing a sob. ‘I don’t want you to go.’

‘Neither do I,’ he admitted, a strange flutter of unfamiliar emotions unfolding in his chest. ‘But I must.’

Something made him turn in place, and Garro found Gallor staring back at him, a new expression of grim concern etched over his scarred features. ‘Do you hear that?’ Gallor raised a hand, as if trying to cup a sound out of the dusty air.

Garro strained to listen, and for a moment he did not comprehend what the other warrior meant. But then his blood chilled as the reality became apparent.

There was nothing to hear. The guns of the Death Guard were quiet.

From the deck of his command barge, Mortarion could hear the crackle of the fracturing stonework across the surface of the Marmax Bastion. The concentrated salvos of beam fire had heated the great granite slabs to incredible temperatures, causing the stone to slag and become molten in certain spots, and it drooled down the sloping flanks, undermining the

structure of the upper tiers. Now he had halted the bombardment, the constant chill of the katabatic winds returned to caress the oppressed fortress, and the masonry split along faults and fissures as it cooled.

Marmax would die slowly and by inches, eventually collapsing in on itself like a gigantic tooth rotted from within. *One more marker against my father's hubris,* considered the primarch, *one more of His creations falling before the undeniable truth. All things decay.*

Let it die, said the whispers, and Mortarion nodded to himself.

All things must die in order to be reborn. The Grandfather had shown him that singular truth when his Legion had been becalmed in the madness of the warp, and the Death Lord had learned the lesson well.

Beneath the prow of the hovering barge, the advance orders of Mortarion's pestilent legionaries waited in stillness, the only sound above the mutter of anti-grav motors the rasping, bubbling chorus of their breathing. He cast a glance across the ranks of hulking forms in rusted, discoloured armour, many stained with glistening ichor, others newly blessed with transformed flesh that oozed from the crevices of their wargear. Even the ever-present clouds of black flies that weaved and danced about the Death Guard mass seemed muted, crawling upon the exposed skin or soiled metals of Mortarion's sons rather than buzzing in swarms.

The Legion was waiting for him. Mortarion raised his pallid, skeletal hand, preparing to give the signal for the terminal phase of the attack – the advance that would leave nothing alive inside the shell of Marmax – and hesitated.

Something was moving on the flanks of the battered citadel. A figure in storm-grey armour and a war-cloak, leaping from one shattered battlement to another, descending towards the broken ground like a falling comet.

Animated as if by their own will, cluster-cannons on the barge's flanks twitched and moved to track the figure, and legionaries with long-bolters among Typhus' Grave Wardens took it upon themselves to take aim.

'Hold your fire,' growled the primarch, his voice carrying. His raised hand became a fist, and unseen, a curious and twisted smile emerged in the shadows of his hood.

'Why?' Mortarion turned to find his First Captain watching him from close by. Deep in his musings, he had allowed himself to dismiss Typhus' presence. ***'A single warrior? I'll have him in ashes before his boots touch***

the earth. Why tarry, my lord? Must I ask this question again?'

'Because I wish it,' he muttered. And in truth, Mortarion already knew who it was that had dared to show his face to them.

The winds brought a shout of defiance to the war-barge, carried over the heads of the thousands-strong Death Guard forces, and the shout was the primarch's name – not a hail or a greeting but an accusation, a *challenge.*

'*Mortarion!*' The warrior in grey called out across the silenced battlefield. '*For Terra's sake and by the will of the Emperor of Mankind, I name you traitor!*'

Traitor. The last word echoed about the ruins surrounding them, repeating off the broken walls and into the haze of war-smoke. Mortarion's smile became brittle, fracturing into a sneer. A swift, stony fury came upon him at the denunciation, indignant rage steeling his limbs.

***'I have betrayed* nothing,'** he hissed, answering the whispers in his mind before they could begin anew. The primarch strode to the edge of the observation gallery and gripped the corroded rail there, tightly enough to compact the metal. He was aware of his warriors in the ranks below looking up at him, eager for his next order, conflicted by his inaction.

The shout came again. '*You are corrupt! You have destroyed what you were sworn to protect! If one shred of what you once were still remains, then show it now! Face me, gene-sire… If you have the courage!*'

'Garro.' Typhus uttered the name like a curse. ***'It appears time has not diminished his arrogance, only nurtured it.'*** The great growth upon the Traveller's back shuddered. The plague swarms nesting within the Destroyer Hive that shared the legionary's transformed body sensed the warrior's need to make murder, and they wanted to fulfil his desire. ***'Grant me the right of dispatch, my lord. Say the word.* Say it.'**

For a moment, Mortarion considered the possibility. He need only nod and Typhus would have his Grave Wardens gun down the Knight Errant. And they would not kill Garro with that opening salvo, *no*. They would likely cripple him, breach his armour and render him unable to fight. Only then would his death begin, a long and tormented process that might last to the Fall of Terra and Throne, and beyond.

It was a tempting prospect. But as with everything Typhus offered his liege-lord, it came with a cost.

If Mortarion granted the kill to the First Captain, then the sacramental

power of Garro’s death would belong to Typhus the Traveller, not to the Reaper of Men.

Mortarion had learned that in his new, changed existence, the boon of Grandfather Nurgle required sacrifice. His body and those of his warriors had been remade, literally transformed into the undying ideal that was the dark soul of his Legion – but the bargain had to be paid for, again and again, and the only coin of value was *death.*

The death of a hero, of a *believer…* That had great worth. Not just as a murder-gift to Nurgle and his gardens of decay, but to the corrupted spirits of Mortarion’s warriors. The changed way was still fresh upon them, and while many embraced the new flesh, others wavered. With this kill upon his scythe’s blade, such a righteous kill indeed, the primarch would reaffirm his mastery of the Legion.

‘No,’ he told Typhus. ***‘You are denied. Garro’s life belongs to me. Once, he pledged it to my name. It is mine to end as I see fit.’***

In spite of himself, Typhus snorted in derision. ***‘My Wardens will obliterate that conceited fool! The oath-breaker is not worth sullying your weapon–’***

‘You would have me turn away from a challenge to my name?’ Mortarion’s rasping voice became flinty.

‘I question this.’ Typhus moderated his tone, but he did not back down. ***‘One legionary calls you to conflict? You give Garro more honour than he deserves!’*** Then he paused, taking a husking, gurgling breath. ***‘Or is it that I do not see your full intent, my lord?’*** He nodded to himself. ***‘Yes. That’s it, isn’t it? Garro has always been a splinter in your eye. He is the Death Guard you could not turn to your will, when the moment came. He is your lapse… Your failure.’***

Belying its name, Mortarion’s great war-scythe, *Silence*, cut through the foetid air with a sharp hiss as the primarch drew it from across his back. Tainted sunlight flashed off the corroded arc of the blade and before Typhus could pull his own weapon, the cutting edge was pressing at his neck.

‘Take care how you speak to me, my brother,’ intoned the Death Lord. ***‘In times past, I have indulged you. I let myself be blind to your ambitions. But those days are over. Remember your place, First Captain.’***

‘I meant no disrespect,’ said Typhus, unwilling to move even the smallest degree while the blade threatened. ***‘I have always been truthful with you.***

Even if you dislike what I say.' At length, he found the will to back away a step, to distance himself from the weapon's killing arc. ***'I speak truth now. It is vanity to answer Garro's challenge. It is beneath you.'***

'Perhaps so,' allowed Mortarion, ***'but the decision is mine to make.'*** He returned *Silence* to its place and spoke again. ***'These are my commands. Have the Legion stand down… And give me fighting room.'***

With each step he took, Garro tensed for the shot that would kill him.

He wondered if he would hear it in the moment before he died, the subsonic thrum of the bow wave before an incoming bolt shell or the scream of torn air about a beam blast. Or did death come unspoken to those it claimed?

For now, the question went unanswered. Not a single warrior in the foul army before him raised a weapon in anger, but he could feel their seething hate for him.

As Garro dropped the last distance to the churned ground at the foot of Marmax, a humming cloud burst from the waiting legionaries. Countless numbers of oily black insects rose from where they had been resting, beating at the icy air with millions of gelid wings.

The swarm writhed over the ground, forming into something like a great black curtain – and with stolid, theatrical grandeur, that curtain parted and so did the ranks of the corrupted. The Reaper of Men was coming to answer Nathaniel Garro's defiance.

Garro took a deep breath and planted his boots firmly amid the mess of mud, burnt stone and rock fragments. Slowly, he removed and stowed his helmet; tactically, the gesture might have been unsound, but it felt wrong – even *dishonourable* – to do this hiding his face behind armour plate.

His bolter was mag-locked across his armour and his sword was at the ready for the draw. He let one hand drop to the hilt of the ancient blade, fingers tracing the studs that would activate its power field. These small, instinctive, pre-battle rituals gave him focus; they let him briefly forget the nature of the foe marching towards him.

But only for a moment.

What strode forth out of the Death Guard ranks barely resembled the primarch Garro had known, now a creature seen through a despoiled lens. Tall and emaciated, a hooded cloak draped over metallic battle armour; but

the cloak was putrefying, rancid cloth where before it had been heavy, dark material, and the armour – once the magnificent, master-crafted work of combat artisans, shining bare steel and bright brass – was now creaking, rotten and rust-rimed.

And worst of all was the figure who wore them. Garro had once bent the knee to a sallow, hard-faced master with a gaze that knew fury, knew sorrow, and knew honour. The monster he saw before him now, wreathed in poison dust, consumptive and decayed, was death incarnate.

Horrified, ashamed and saddened beyond measure, Garro met the gaze of his liege-lord and gene-sire for the first time since the great betrayal at Isstvan. And he asked the only question that he could.

'What have you become?'

'I am what we have always strived to be,' Mortarion intoned, eyes flashing in the dark beneath his hood. ***'Undying. Unstoppable. Unmatched.'***

A pall of fear rose in Garro's hearts and his hand tightened on the hilt of his sword. 'What did it cost you, my lord?'

The question seemed to surprise the primarch, and he hesitated before replying. ***'The price… The price was everything.'*** Through his breather mask, Mortarion took a deep inhalation of the toxins whirling around him, as if sustaining himself with them. ***'Garro,'*** he wheezed. ***'You were one of my best. I have not forgotten. You can be again. You can rejoin your battle-brothers. There is still time.'***

Of all the words he thought Mortarion might utter, the last Garro expected were these. After everything that had taken place since Horus Lupercal's heresy had commenced, Garro had embraced the path of the outsider, the outcast.

'He will win,' said the primarch, as if plucking the thought of the Warmaster from Garro's mind. ***'It is inevitable. The sons will soon kill their father, as is fitting. And a new world will beckon.'*** Mortarion reached inside his cloak, and when his skeletal hand returned, there were two corroded metal cups in his grip. Black fluid, dark as night and oil-thick, shimmered in them.

He offered one of the cups to Garro, and compelled by an impulse he could not resist, the warrior accepted it.

Garro stared into the depths of the cup and sensed something powerful

uncoiling around him, as if the air itself were transforming. A boundless grief, a longing he had buried deep within, reawakened.

The breaking of his Legion's oath had left him bereft in ways he could not articulate. He thought of Gallor's anger and bitterness, of the younger warrior's unanswered sorrow at what they had lost.

There was an undeniable part of Garro that wished time could be turned back, that what was sundered could be remade. *And perhaps, in one way, it could be*.

'Might you honour me by sharing a drink?' said Mortarion.

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INTERVAL II

The planet Barbarus: after reunion

The shuttles touched down in an area beyond a city the locals called Safehold, in a sector of cleared grasslands that helots were busily turning into the planet's first starport. A sleeting deluge of black rain was falling, hissing where it landed, giving everything a bone-deep chill.

Nathaniel Garro was the last to descend the ramp of his transport, letting the others file out before him, a handful of warriors among a mass of human auxiliaries brought down from the fleet in high orbit. He saw other figures disembarking from the rest of the craft in the shuttle flight – more towering legionaries like him, clad in newly forged, newly liveried armour.

When the majority of them had left the surface of this planet over a solar year ago, they had walked with the tread of men. Now they returned as transhumans, reforged by the great science of the Emperor of Mankind and His scienticians. Garro heard them laughing and calling out to people in the

crowds who waited for them, the prodigal sons returning to the death world that had borne them.

Not all of those taken from Barbarus to be uplifted had survived the process. Many perished passing through the gauntlet of the change, their bodies rejecting the implants with terminal effect. In the usual scheme of things, neophyte legionaries underwent the implantation regimen and enhancile conditioning over a cycle of several years, and at a far younger age – this had been Garro's lot, plucked as a stringy youth from the Albian outlands on Terra when he was only thirteen winters old, for induction into the Legion. The new intake had no such consideration, forced through a crash-course process that turned these men into Legiones Astartes with uncommon rapidity.

Some said that it was only the Emperor's personal intervention in the programme that had kept the Barbaruns from dying to a man, but Garro thought otherwise. After a year in their company, he was firmly convinced that the sons of this blighted world were too stubborn to die easily.

The process of *reunion* was well under way. After finding and reuniting with his lost son Mortarion, the Emperor had presented the primarch with the war fleet and the warriors that were his bequest – the XIV Legion, known since their inception as the Dusk Raiders. Mortarion's first act had been to cast that name aside and rechristen them as the Death Guard, in echo of the fighters he had led in his rebellion against Barbarus' cruel rulers, the Overlords.

Garro was no longer conscious of the new insignia on his armour, the white skull upon a six-pointed star rendered in dark green. Like many things, it was another change to take on and assimilate before the Legion returned to their first calling – the prosecution of the Emperor's Great Crusade.

Taking his first step onto the surface of the planet, Garro looked across a bleak landscape of grey hills, past granite tors and distant mountains, and up at the soured sky. He tasted faint toxins on the damp breeze, the weak traces of the poisonous mists that wreathed the higher ranges of Barbarus' atmosphere, and at his feet, stiff blades of metallic-looking grass crunched under his boots. The planet was hard and unwelcoming, and he did not doubt it hid a thousand ways to kill the unwary. That was the truth of a death world: nothing weak could exist there.

He skirted the landing field, avoiding the crowds. The people gathered around their changed brethren, many of them marvelling at their new forms, some daring to reach out and touch their faces and the surface of their grey-green armour. Garro avoided their gazes, instead following the approaches to Safehold. Nearby, he saw evidence of construction and more transformation – buildings and machinery transplanted from the fleet, brought down in hopes of accelerating Barbarus to the level of the rest of the Imperium. In a way, the planet was being uplifted too, and Garro had learned that new initiate cadres from the Barbarun populace were already being selected. As the Legion had once taken its tithe of young men from Terra, now it would do the same here. And perhaps, at some future point, there would come a time when there were no more Dusk Raiders among the Death Guard.

He shook off the thought, finding himself at the foot of a great black wall near the city gates. Assembled out of rough-hewn stone slabs, it was carved with countless names in the local Low Gothic script. Garro reached out and ran the fingertips of his gauntlet over the letters, inclining his head in solemn respect. This, he understood. A memorial for the dead.

'Why do you bow to them?' Hearing the voice, Garro looked up. A woman in a military uniform stood a short distance away, arms folded over her chest, eyeing him gravely. The way she unconsciously favoured one leg told him that she had been badly injured once in her life, but her manner was that of someone who would not let such a thing prevent her from fighting. 'They're all cinders and the lands are better for it.'

Garro drew back his hand. 'These are *not* the names of your war dead?'

'These are the names of the Overlords and collaborators we slaughtered to free Barbarus,' she corrected. 'Written in stone so that any creature who might try to rule our world knows how much it'll cost them.'

'Ah. A warning, I see. Forgive my error.' He nodded. 'So tell me, how do you venerate those who perished fighting these Overlords?'

The woman frowned. 'We keep them here.' She touched her heart and head. Then she took a step closer. 'You're one of the New-comer's warrior-breed.'

'Newcomer?' Garro didn't know the reference.

'Your Emperor.'

'He is *your* Emperor as well,' noted the warrior. 'He is Mortarion's father.'

‘So I hear.’ The woman sized him up, frowning. ‘The iterators He sent here say your kind are remade in His image, yes? You are changed, just like He’s changed our fathers, cousins and brothers.’

‘Yes.’

‘Why just the men?’ She drew herself level to stare Garro in the eye. ‘Seems a waste of good resources.’ She nodded at the wall. ‘Women shed their blood to carve those names as much as men did.’

‘We’ll ask that question of the Emperor when next we see Him,’ said another voice. Garro turned to find Mortarion’s wolfish comrade in arms striding towards them. Typhon gave a nod and held back a grin.

‘Is that you, Calas?’ The woman gave the other legionary an incredulous look. ‘What happened to the man I knew from Heller’s Cut?’

‘That skinny young fellow is in here somewhere.’ Typhon’s expression hardened, as if he didn’t care to be reminded of his past. ‘Don’t you have a post to mind, soldier? Be about it. Lieutenant Garro and I have things to discuss.’

‘We do?’ Garro watched the woman depart.

‘I’ve been observing you.’ Typhon’s steely gaze bored into him, and Garro found his intensity disquieting. ‘Most of the Terran-born men in the Legion have embraced the reunion with gusto, welcoming their new brethren, training in live-fire exercises with Mortarion and the rest of us… As we have each learned the ways and manners of the other.’ Typhon pointed a finger at him. ‘But you, Garro. You could not do so at a remove, as others have. I think something in you needed to see the world where your primarch grew to manhood. To feel its air in your lungs, its mud under your boots.’ He opened his hands, taking in the landscape around them. ‘Am I right?’

‘Your insight does you credit,’ said Garro. ‘Yes. I wanted to know Barbarus for myself. To walk the path the primarch did, albeit for a brief time.’

‘And now you are here, what do you think of it?’

Garro looked at the wall of death, considering what it represented, and then away towards the distant, forbidding crags. ‘I am beginning to understand.’

‘The Legion is undergoing a seismic shift,’ said Typhon. ‘The Dusk Raiders you knew are gone. The Death Guard rise in their place.’

‘It is the will of the Emperor and Mortarion.’

Typhon was silent for a moment. ‘The primarch is in the process of reorganising the Legion into something… better suited to his command style. Your Great Company, Garro. The Seventh. It is currently without a captain to lead it.’

‘That is correct.’ Garro tensed, suddenly uncertain as to where the conversation was leading him.

‘Would you like the glory of that posting, lieutenant?’

He considered his next words carefully. ‘I would welcome the duty of it. But as for glory… I don’t care for that.’

Typhon laughed, as if he had just scored a victory. ‘It seems everything I’ve heard about you is true, Garro! *Good.* In the wars to come, Mortarion will need a man he can rely on to lead the Seventh.’

‘The primarch has my blade and my oath,’ said Garro. ‘It will always be so.’ But he couldn’t keep a thread of doubt from his voice, and Typhon heard it.

‘You have misgivings,’ said the other warrior. ‘You ask yourself, how can you hope to become part of a Legion bequeathed to a world and a master you have never known?’

A chill ran through Garro’s blood. Typhon spoke the words as if he had plucked them from the hidden depths of the warrior’s thoughts.

The other legionary went on. ‘You feel… you are not one of us?’

At length, Garro shook his head, finding the resolution that had previously escaped him. ‘No. Perhaps I did have reservations, but not now. You…’ He indicated Typhon and by extension, all of Barbarus. ‘*You* are one of *us.* Even if you and your kindred were born here, the sons of this planet remain children of Terra, even if millennia separated us. You are grown from those who struck out into space before the Age of Old Night. We all rise from the same birthworld. We are all humans, tracing our lineage back to that place.’

‘Indeed?’ Typhon placed a hand on Garro’s shoulder and his smile returned. ‘Well, *captain.* Perhaps one day I will meet you there. I will walk your path, and see it for myself.’

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FIVE

Reaper of Men

No Quarter

Fall of a Champion

Garro looked into the cup, and in the tiny sea of darkness it held, he saw oblivion.

In the past, this Death Guard tradition was a celebration of their fortitude, a customary ingesting of poison that the powerful physiology of a legionary could resist, endure and overcome. But like everything else about Mortarion's sons, it had been twisted into something new.

Garro was certain that the cup contained blood, or something like it.

His primarch's vitae, gifted like an offering – and if he were to drink from it, what then? It would be submission.

Sundered from his Legion for so long, Garro would be changed and remade just as they had been, but he would be *part* of them again. For what seemed like an age, he had buried the sorrow of his self-imposed exile beneath a righteous fury towards his former brethren. But now, just for a moment, the warrior allowed himself to acknowledge a singular truth.

‘I did not wish this,’ he said quietly, his words caught on the wind. ‘To turn against the Legion I pledged my life to. I did not want to draw weapons against my battle-brothers. It is anathema to me.’

‘Every path across the moor is thorny,’ intoned the Reaper of Men, as he watched the legionary with severe, yellowing eyes. ***‘But there is always a way back. Nothing is constant, Nathaniel. The universe that surrounds us is not fixed. It is malleable, forever in states of change and evolution. Decay and rebirth. My eyes were opened to it in the warp.’*** He gestured to the sky and the distorted light from the war raging over their heads. ***‘This truth goes beyond Horus and my father. Beyond this conflict, or any other. You can see it too. If you wish. You can become greater, as we have.’***

Garro looked up. ‘That… is not our fate, my lord. I am a warrior, gene-forged and uplifted in the Emperor’s name. You are His son, cut from His flesh, bred to be a war god made manifest. We were not created to evolve. We were made to fight and to die for the glory of the Imperium of Man.’ His hearts felt hollow as the words fell from his lips. ‘We are but weapons. Instruments of fate. Knights of Grey and Lords of Destruction.’

Oblivion beckoned. It would be easy to tip back the cup, to swallow the contents and let his burdens be taken away. As Garro held that thought in his mind, he felt empathy for Euphrati Keeler. He understood how obliteration could seem like the better of every option, the seduction of the impulse to let go and fall towards the darkness.

But at the far end of that spectrum was the singular instinct that had guided Garro’s hand from the very start, the purpose that could never be denied.

‘We can be more than weapons if we wish,’ said Mortarion. ***‘We can defy fate.’***

‘No.’ Garro shook his head. ‘We are the tools of higher powers, of the greater players. If you cannot see that, sire, then you are blind.’ At the legionary’s words, the primarch’s cold expression shifted towards anger, and Garro brought his reply to its core. ‘The difference between us, the truth I have learned since I broke with your command, is that I *accept* it. You still believe you can determine your destiny, but you are wrong.’

Mortarion released a low growl and pointed at the cup in Garro’s hand. ***‘I would have your answer.’*** The primarch’s rasping tones carried back to him. ***‘Will you return to us, or will you perish here?’***

Garro raised the cup, and with deliberate slowness, he tilted it until the oily contents drooled out to spatter and hiss against the broken stones. Then, with a flick of his wrist, he tossed the empty hemisphere into the dirt at Mortarion's feet, as a ripple of terse reaction flowed through the silent Legion watching them.

'Mistake.' The primarch drank down his own cup and savoured it. ***'You have no concept of what you have rejected.'***

'I know full well,' Garro replied, his gaze raking over the other Death Guard, over the ranks of monsters that had once been his brethren.

'Step aside, then, and I will gift you with a swift death.' Mortarion's lip curled. ***'Call it a mercy, in honour of the past times you served me.'***

With a crackle of unchained energy, the power conduits embedded in the metal of Garro's great sword came to life as the legionary drew the weapon. The crystalline metal of it sang as it cleared the scabbard to hang in the air before them.

'I regret I must decline,' said Garro.

The blade was called *Libertas* and it shone like a beacon through the battle-smoke. Of unknown age, as ancient as mountains, the weapon carried by Garro was his talisman, but even he did not know the fullness of its origins. Some believed it had been forged before the age of Old Night, in echo of the great Terran blades that had come before it – *Kusanan of the Valorous*, the *Xkal*, the *Vhorpul* and the *Zul'fiqar*. For Nathaniel Garro, the weapon was as much a part of him as his hands, his limbs and his hearts. A thousand enemies had perished upon its monomolecular edge, a thousand foes had been cut down never to rise again.

But it had never been drawn in anger against a son of the Emperor, fallen or otherwise.

Mortarion gave a solemn nod and his giant war-scythe, *Silence*, fell into his waiting hands.

'So be it,' he intoned.

It was not an *attack;* it was an *explosion* of steel.

It was an assault like no other the legionary had ever experienced, a howling torrent of blades that came at Garro as if the air itself had transformed into razors.

Thunderous bangs of metal on metal sounded across the battleground, and

each blow the warrior managed to parry hit so hard he feared the shock of them alone would break his bones and tear his muscles.

Garro had not one instant to consider how he might try to counter-attack. His every iota of thought and skill was pulled unto the overwhelming challenge of simply staying alive for the next second, and the next, and the next. He dodged and spun, fighting to keep out of the reach of the war-scythe's massive head, but Mortarion's weapon was everywhere at once.

It defied logic. A blade as large as a human was tall, heavy as starship metal, and yet the primarch made it move as if it were a paper streamer caught in the breeze. Great, thick sparks of actinic green-blue jetted when *Silence* and *Libertas* briefly crossed one another, some starting fires in the dry dust where they landed.

Garro had battled mutants and aliens, beasts and monsters alike, but nothing and no one like Mortarion. His recollection dredged up the memory of a sparring match he had once fought with a member of the Emperor's personal guard, a cold-eyed Custodes named Khorarinn; it was said that the Adeptus Custodes were to the Emperor what the Legiones Astartes were to the primarchs, and to face one was to face a titan. But even drawing on the hard lessons he had learned that day did little to give Garro an edge.

Mortarion cut hissing arcs through the air, knocking back the Knight Errant with each sweep, pressing him towards the corner of a fallen structure – the remains of a covered arcade that had once been part of an ornamental garden. Garro would quickly run out of room to defend himself unless he altered the language of the fight.

Retreating, he swung *Libertas* – not to parry the war-scythe, but to cut cleanly through a pillar holding up what remained of the arcade's roof and the ruins piled upon it. Stone and tile groaned, and tonnes of heaped debris slumped from where it was balanced above, rolling forward in a glittering rock-slide.

Mortarion was forced to step back or be buried, giving Garro precious seconds to extend the distance between them. Amid the growling din of the falling rubble, he heard the muttering snarls of the Death Guard as they cursed him and cried out for his murder.

The reprieve lasted scarcely a moment. As Garro jumped free of the churning clouds of dust from the collapsing building, a flicker of ill light off filth-encrusted brass flashed across his path. In a fluid motion, Mortarion

held *Silence* aside in a lazy, whickering spin, and drew his other signature weapon with his other hand.

The drum-shaped gun was known as the *Lantern*, and it was known that the Emperor Himself had gifted it to His son on the occasion of their reunion. Garro had seen its awesome power many times during the Great Crusade, when Mortarion had used it to bring the light of final, fatal illumination to those who defied compliance. Now that power was turned upon him.

Blinding and brilliant, a crackling searchlight beam of pure white energy burst forth from the weapon's muzzle and cut a fiery slash through earth, stone and debris. It atomised everything it touched, leaving a wide, glowing scar in its wake.

Garro charged away, feeling the searing halo-effect of its lethal radiation across the bare skin of his shaven head, and for a moment he feared the white fire would engulf him, but then the *Lantern*'s light died and he went into a turning roll, coming up with his Paragon bolter aimed straight back in the same direction.

Gripping the boltgun in an iron hold, Garro fired round after round at the towering figure in ragged robes, desperately hoping to find a weak spot or some tiny, momentary advantage.

Mass-reactive Kraken shells blurred across the distance between shooter and target, and Mortarion brought up his arms to protect his head. His corroded vambraces clanked together like steel gates slamming shut and the bolt-rounds impacted there, bright globes of detonation and shock-sphere effects pummelling the Reaper of Men where he stood.

Mortarion leaned into the bolt hits and held his ground, weathering everything Garro had thrown at him. The Knight Errant let the Paragon weapon's emptied magazine fall away, ramming a full replenishment back in its place, but the primarch was already moving again, his monstrous beam-gun forgotten for the moment, his war-scythe returning to the fray.

Garro twisted away to avoid the whistling downward arc of *Silence*'s falling blade, but the blow was not meant to strike him. With the deft delicacy of a chirurgeon's scalpel, the curve of Mortarion's scythe hooked the frame of Garro's bolter and wrenched it out of his hands before he could finish reloading it.

The master-crafted gun spun high into the air, and with a second flick of

his whipcord arm, Mortarion's blade caught it and smashed it down against the fallen brickwork.

Garro bit down on the red flash of pain searing through his gun arm, the bones dislocated by the primarch's showy attack. With a savage jerk, he snapped his limb back into its socket, and looked up.

Mortarion was aiming the shimmering muzzle of the *Lantern* directly at him, the air around it lensed by its incredible heat.

'End him!' A shout rose to Garro's ears, and he recognised the voice. *Calas Typhon,* or whatever grotesque creature he had become, was calling for his execution.

Garro straightened, tightening his grip on his sword. If these were to be his last breaths, he would take them in defiance.

But the blazing annihilation of the kill-fire never came.

'Not yet,' said the primarch. ***'You have forsaken the right to die quickly.'*** Mortarion's skeletal fingers curled away from the *Lantern*'s trigger-bar, and the weapon snapped back. Then, with slow deliberation, he unlatched the beam-cannon's holster and threw it, the great pistol and all, into the clasping hands of one of Typhus' Grave Wardens standing close by. That done, he saluted Garro with the head of his scythe, bringing the blade to his eyes. ***'This ends in*** the ***old way. Blade upon blade. With metal and blood.'***

Garro hesitated, glaring at the primarch's hooded visage, his anger slowly building. *He is toying with me.* The warrior knew that Mortarion could have finished this confrontation in seconds, had he wished to. But just like the Death Guard advance on the Marmax Bastion, the pace of their fight was not being determined by tactical need or capability. It was done for show, in some arcane manner, for sacrament.

Mortarion wants to kill me by inches, Garro told himself. *He wishes to make me pay for my challenge.*

He will make an example of me.

Garro gave a slow nod, and with *Libertas* gripped in his mailed fist, he brought the hilt of the power sword to his chest, over the golden eagle of his armour's cuirass, and beat it twice upon the site of his primary heart.

'So be it,' Garro intoned, repeating the Death Lord's earlier words. *Every second this battle goes on,* he vowed, *is one moment more for Helig and the Saint.*

Mortarion drew in a gale of smoke-filled air, filling his lungs with a

rumbling wheeze, and the war-scythe rose, held fast in his pallid fingers. The Reaper of Men exhaled and the reek of a tomb deadened the ground about him.

But this time the Knight Errant did not wait for the primarch's assault to commence. To be Death Guard was to fight as an inexorable force, to resist as an immovable object – but time spent as Malcador the Sigillite's Agentia Primus, outside the strictures of his old Legion, had taught Garro the value of boldness.

Libertas glowed with coruscating blue fire as the energy matrix in the blade ignited. Garro launched himself off a stone ledge, his power armour turning the leap into a gunshot-quick attack, and he sprinted towards his foe.

The legionary's weapon led the dance, shrieking through the air, crackling with power enough to scorch away the clouds of toxic dust gathered around the fighters.

The Grave Wardens and the warp-flesh legionaries surrounding the makeshift arena reacted to the ferocity of Garro's assault, beating their weapons on their armour at a slow, steady pace, and those who stood too near drew back lest they be hit by a glancing blow.

Mortarion slipped out of every stab and lunge by the barest of margins, the glowing point of *Libertas* spearing towards him, tearing at his robes with each near-hit. The pestilent flies droning about his shoulders buzzed angrily and swarmed away, swirling to avoid the edge-effect of the power sword, others burned to a crisp on the wing as the blade passed through them.

The primarch released a dry, corpse-breath exhalation. He had expected to face the same man with whom he had shared the cups aboard the *Endurance* many years ago, but he was quickly learning that Nathaniel Garro *was* a changed man after all.

More with anger than by design, Mortarion swung *Silence* in a tight sweep that would have taken the head from a human's shoulders without slowing. Garro ducked beneath the flashing blade. The legionary reversed his power sword and was already extending away from the clash – but he could not resist the chance to jab a back-thrust into the primarch's guard.

The tip of *Libertas* caught Mortarion's right vambrace and gouged a bright score a half-metre long in the discoloured ceramite. The first mark of the

duel went to the legionary, not the lord.

A dark and serpentine rage uncoiled in the primarch's chest at this insult. There had been a time when Mortarion of Barbarus held to a taciturn character, rarely showing emotion, seldom giving voice to even his deepest fury.

Even when his hands had been around the throats of the Overlords who had oppressed his people, Mortarion had controlled the anger that fuelled him. But the Mark of Nurgle had opened new doors in his soul, and the Grandfather's embrace had transformed him in a myriad of ways – not just in body and mind, but in spirit. His eyes had been opened to the numinous truths that he had spent a lifetime hating.

Now he let his anger rise like acidic bile, relishing the novel sensation. *It will not be enough to beat Garro, to shed his blood and kill him,* decided the primarch. *He must be humiliated. Demeaned. And when it is done, I will grant him my consent to perish.*

Mortarion twisted his war-scythe, hand sliding over hand as he inverted the mighty weapon's course, bringing the heavy pommel at the far end into play. As big as an ambull's talon, the brass striker could crush a human skull into paste or punch a hole through ferrocrete. He aimed it at Garro's retreating form and the blow connected with a sickening crack before the warrior could escape.

The legionary spun away, batted back into a pile of fallen brickwork, trailing splinters of broken armour plating behind him. Mortarion heard the air explode from Garro's lungs and the whine of overstressed servomotors as his wargear took the full brunt of the hit. At his back, the Traveller's Grave Wardens rattled their rusted blades and manreapers in chorus, sounding praise for their master's punishing blow.

Garro's world spun around him, an earthquake of agony rolling across his torso from one side to the other.

For dizzying moments – for what seemed like an eternity – he lost his grip on time and rode out a storm of torment. The legionary's armoured form crashed through a jagged mass of broken masonry, and his nerve-shunts reacted, racing to protect him from a bolt of pain-shock that would have burst his secondary heart.

Reacting without conscious thought, Garro staggered out of the crater he

had made with his landing and lurched up, boots scraping over compacted layers of stone, metal debris and the half-buried corpses of the luckless. His head swam and briefly a giant shadow passed over him, as the light of the sun fell behind the clouds. At his back, the battered form of the Marmax Bastion resembled a gargantuan tomb marker, and Garro's unseated thoughts played tricks on him. He imagined his name up there in twenty-metre-high letters, etched by laser into the surface of the stones.

Here lies Nathaniel Garro: Terran. Legionary. Martyr.

'Not yet,' he coughed, dispelling the grim portent, ejecting a string of blood-laced spittle from his mouth. '*Not… yet.*'

Tiny, jewel-bright icons flickered around the circumference of his power armour's neck ring, warning him of system malfunctions and integrity breaches. With just one direct hit, Mortarion had been able to crack the ceramite sheath of Garro's breastplate and damage the synthetic muscles beneath. Multiple redundant systems inside the complex weave of the armour's technology reacted to the impact the way a body would react to an infected wound – isolating and containing it, shunting function away to other elements. He could still move, but there was a tremor in his steps, now a fraction off balance.

Garro shook out of the post-impact daze, feeling his blood rush hot as his implanted organs dumped booster endorphins and chem-philtres into his veins. He drew himself to his full height, striding out of the dust. *Libertas* was still in his hand, locked there.

And suddenly, he could feel there was something *more* at play around him.

At first, Garro thought the sense of sunlight-warmth on his face was a side effect of the pain-shunts, but it brought with it a strange kind of clarity – almost a *peace* – that was at once new and familiar to him.

Unable to stop himself, Garro's gaze was drawn up towards the highest tiers of the Marmax Bastion's ruined pinnacle, sensing, *knowing* that kind eyes were looking down on him.

Keeler? Her name was on his lips, so close that he almost whispered it.

Was this how the troopers on the battlements had felt when she spoke to them?

Was this the power of the Saint? Not the fire of martial oratory or the clarion call to die well… but the simple drive to live*?*

Heavy footfalls resonated through the rubble beneath his boots, and Garro

turned back to find Mortarion advancing on him once again. The primarch looked up in the same direction and nodded to himself.

'Her time will come,' he husked. ***'You will not save her.'***

'We will see!' Garro replied with a lethal slash that cut across the axis of Mortarion's approach, and the primarch sidestepped the attack. He parried the blow with the length of his scythe and the legionary spun his sword about before the Death Lord could turn the move back upon him.

Silence's great arc of blackened steel chopped at the debris and ruins, seeking Garro like the fanned head of a giant metal cobra. He fought to deflect the strikes with lateral counter-blows from the broad edge of *Libertas*' blade, impact upon impact sounding in loud ringing clangs, as if a death knell were tolling.

The blunt face of the scythe-head clipped Garro's right pauldron, cracking the grey-white protective sheath around his shoulder, and he spun into the hit, the momentum carrying him back. Typhus and the Grave Wardens hissed their approval once again as the hit was followed by a second and then a third.

Garro staggered over the ruins, fighting to claim a moment to gather himself. The legionary took a wheezing, pain-laced breath of the heavy air, and his scarred face formed into a scowl. The damage Mortarion was inflicting on him was meticulous and deliberate, set to slow him – but the primarch was taking his time about it, pulling each of his blows, deliberately drawing out the fight.

In his own dour way, Mortarion was playing to the gallery. Not just to Typhus and the Grave Wardens, not just to his misbegotten and malformed warrior-sons, but to the Warmaster and the dark, Chaotic forces that Horus had allied himself to.

The turbulent sky above them was illuminated with burning ships and rods of god-fire. Was Horus looking down on this scene even now, watching his brother? Were the Ruinous Powers weighing Mortarion's actions, measuring his worth as their daemonic avatar?

The legionary's seething anger rushed hot, his fury boiling over at his primarch's arrogance. A tiny splinter of Garro's spirit had hoped that he would be able to find some measure of humanity still alive in Mortarion, but this act of hubris showed him that if such a thing did exist, it lay beyond his reach.

Sworn to the Death Guard's banner years before he had even laid eyes on his gene-sire, Garro had longed to follow a primarch who was everything he wished Mortarion could be, but the cruel lie was exposed.

Mortarion cannot be redeemed. None of them can.

With a snarl, Garro bolted forward again, dashing inside the primarch's reach, acting in the instant while Mortarion's attention was split. Grasping the hilt of *Libertas* with both hands, he swung the power sword up, cutting through the crackling curtain of the Death Lord's foetid robes and scraping the edge of the rusted plates of armour protecting Mortarion's throat. The opening was fleeting, miniscule – but it was there.

Mortarion jerked away, scarcely avoiding a cut that would have slashed open his throat. The tip of the blade sliced through the primarch's tattered hood and carved a deep furrow across the sunken cheek above his breather mask, a trickle of foul green-black ichor oozing from the wound.

Mortarion bellowed – half in shocked surprise, half in pain – and in blind reflex, he struck out with his war-scythe. The heavy shaft of the great weapon cracked Garro across the chest and he was swatted away as if he weighed nothing, back into the wreckage of the collapsed arcade.

The primarch's clawed hand went to the site of the cut on his pallid face, as his Death Guard beat their blades in a deafening refrain.

Dark blood, oil-thick, slipped through his emaciated fingers and ran away in rivulets, as if the fluid had a mind of its own.

He cut me. The realisation burned more than the pain of the wound, which even now was waning, transforming into a blessed warmth as the sallow flesh knit itself back together across a newborn scar. It seemed an impossibility that this turncoat oath-breaker, this wretched dogmatic, could dare to strike Mortarion – far less to draw his blood. And yet, he had.

Let it die. Let it die. Let it die. Let it die.

The whispers in his head grew to drown out all but the voice amid the exhortation of rusted steel banging on bloated ceramite: the Traveller's voice, echoing to him as if spoken directly into the primarch's ear.

'This game has gone on long enough, my lord,' said Typhus. ***'Garro cannot be redeemed.'***

'Aye,' he muttered, ***'it would seem so.'***

Despite the unfettered power of the blow that had put him down, the

Knight Errant was still alive, struggling to drag himself up from where he had fallen. Sparks fluttered from the joints of his leg where Garro's augmetic limb twitched and juddered, the bionics within malfunctioning as he tried to put his weight upon it. As Mortarion approached, Garro grasped towards his sword. It lay fallen just out of his reach, sizzling in a puddle of greasy meltwater.

Before the warrior could reach the weapon, the Death Lord turned his war-scythe to bring the great brass pommel to bear, dropping it to hammer into Garro's chest, smashing him back into the rubble. He lifted it high once more, and with savage precision, struck down again and again, beating against the golden adornment across the fallen warrior's chest – the honour-forged cuirass that bore the head of a virtuous, defiant eagle.

Garro's artisan-wrought wargear was a gift from the Terran Court to the old Dusk Raiders Legion, a boon bestowed by the will of the Emperor Himself. Only one example of its martial artistry existed, and had it not shrouded the battle-captain, it might have hung in some gallery of treasures.

Mortarion destroyed it, blow by blow, smashing the golden metal into fragments, beheading the noble eagle, beating Garro against the stone until his face was a mask of blood. The cuirass cracked down its length and split, exposing under-layers and the armour's damaged works beneath.

'Your honours and your laurels are meaningless,' said Mortarion, stepping back to take a long breath. His words could equally have been directed towards his distant father or the wounded, bleeding warrior at his feet.

The swarms of black flies churning over the battlefield sensed the vitae spilled across the ground and they came in their masses, seething and droning, turning the air into a living, reeking haze.

Garro coughed out a thick gobbet of dark, arterial blood, and the insects went into a frenzy. They could taste the stink of death-to-come in the air, and they were eager to feed upon it. The legionary gasped as he laboured to breathe, but still he lived, and still he struggled to right himself. Resentment burned in his gaze, and virtuous hate fuelled its fire.

Mortarion raised *Silence*, pointing with the heavy pommel, aiming it at Garro's chest and the shattered armour. ***'Perhaps… I will not destroy you.'*** His words echoed through the buzzing swarm, the flies vibrating at the same timbre, mimicking his speech. ***'The spark of life that is Nathaniel***

Garro will gutter out… But your body? That will be renewed. Evolved and reborn.'

The swarm's razor-saw choir shifted and changed, the sound becoming something like mocking laughter. Every one of the pestilent insects was a mote of consciousness granted un-life by the Grandfather's will, a collective daemonic form that could fill dying flesh as oil might fill an empty flask. It had no uttered identity beyond the mutter of iridescent wings and the clatter of chitinous mandibles – but those few cursed to see it walk when clothed in human meat had given it a name. They called it the Lord of Flies.

'No…' Garro forced out the denial, his eyes widening as understanding came to him.

'In death, you will serve what you betrayed,' intoned Mortarion. ***'I gave you the chance to return to us of your own free will, battle-captain, and you refused that tribute. But it* will *come to pass. The Lord is eager to manifest within a new host. Your flesh will be a fitting one.'***

It was better than the Terran-born deserved, mused the primarch, but with the daemon at his side, his dominance of the Legion would be renewed along with it. Garro had witnessed the Lord of Flies possess three of his comrades – Solun Decius, Meric Voyen and the World Eaters exile Macer Varren – and each time he had been party to the daemon's defeat and dissolution. There was ritual power to be mined from the act of allowing Garro's flesh to be taken as its next chosen vessel.

Mortarion's eyes narrowed, and he smothered a tiny ember of dismay at the prospect. He saw now his hope to make the Knight Errant bend the knee had been a wasted one. There was no other choice. Typhus was right; Garro could not be redeemed. This would be the only way to bring him back into the Death Guard fold.

With a moan of effort, Garro lurched forward. He forced himself up onto the broken, spitting metal of his augmetic leg, snatching at his sword, stabbing it into the earth as a makeshift support for his weight.

The primarch pressed the war-scythe's heavy blade against Garro's chest and pushed him back before he could fully rise, holding him in place.

'How did you think this was going to end, Nathaniel?' Mortarion cocked his head, staring down at his once favoured warrior. ***'You believe you are some righteous champion, anointed by my father? It is delusion. Can you***

see now, the lie of that? Can you see, that every path He laid out – for me, for you and your brothers – they culminate in death?'

'Only in death…' rasped Garro, 'does duty end.'

'No,' said the primarch, as the swarm gathered to him and he stood tall. ***'Not for you. You will die and rise, die again and rise again, for eternity under my command.'*** A sickening crackle sounded from Mortarion's back as the filth-encrusted plates across his torso buckled and split. ***'This is how you end, Knight Errant. In shadows and decay.'***

Mortarion's armour parted in jagged fault lines and great sails of glistening, semi-transparent matter unfurled from within. Briefly drooping across his back to touch the polluted ground, the malformed sheets stiffened in the light, growing firmer by the second, drying and strengthening. The new-made pinions were shimmering, ghastly things, corpse-beetle black and oleaginous silver. Maggots writhed in their wet crevices, fatty fluids dripping as the extensions lifted out to their full width.

Mortarion's gigantic insect wings curved down to blot out the weakened sunlight falling upon the battlefield, and as Garro was shrouded in dimness, the buzzing of the daemonic flies became a deafening howl.

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SIX

Hand of Death

Libertas

The Rest is Silence

‘Is it done?’ Gallor demanded an answer from Greff, limping towards the trooper as the young human dithered in the smoky corridor. ‘Are we ready to depart?’

‘We, uh, we are, ser legionary.’ His head bobbed. ‘As well as we can be, I mean.’ Greff gestured in the direction of the landing pad. ‘The men asked if we’d make it out and in honesty, I can’t speak to that. The carrier’s heavily overloaded–’

Gallor cut him off with a shake of the head. ‘Content yourself that the decision is no longer in your hands. If we die, it won’t be you to blame.’

Greff blinked. ‘That’s not very reassuring.’

‘It wasn’t meant to be.’ Gallor looked past him, towards the sections of the Dilectio Tier that had already been evacuated. Dusty light filtered in from that direction, cast up by the clash on the battleground beyond. ‘Anyone who wants to stay behind, they can do so. And they will die. If they are

lucky.’ His hard, matter-of-fact statement echoed off the walls.

‘And if… they are unlucky?’ Greff’s knuckles whitened around the grip of the lascarbine in his hands.

Gallor looked back at him. ‘You have heard the stories about the horrors the Warmaster has brought to Terra. The creatures out of nightmares. The things they do to the living and the dead.’

‘Yes.’ Greff swallowed hard. ‘B-but I didn’t believe them.’

‘That was your first mistake. Whatever you have heard… the truth is worse than you can imagine.’ He sniffed the air, ignoring the fear on the trooper’s face. ‘Keeler isn’t on board the carrier. Tell me where she is.’

‘She, ah, she was near the battlements, gathering her things.’

‘Who guards her?’

‘I…’ Greff’s mouth dropped open. ‘Oh, Throne. I didn’t think to–’

Before the trooper could finish, a woman’s anguished cry echoed down the passageway to them, and Gallor bit down on a curse. He broke into a hobbling run, cursing his damaged wargear as he went.

‘Go to the carrier!’ He shouted the order back over his shoulder. ‘Be ready to lift off the moment I return!’

Gallor did not pause to be sure if the trooper was following the command. He disliked working with these humans. Some could be well disciplined and follow directions, but others had an unpleasant tendency to lose focus whenever danger was at hand.

He had no time or interest in playing nursemaid to Greff and his fellow soldiers. His prime mission – Battle-Captain Garro’s last command – was to preserve the life of Euphrati Keeler and he would apply himself to that.

‘Keeler!’ He shouted her name as he reached the outer ring of the battlements. The weapons emplacements, hard points and barriers lay abandoned, home only to the cold winds off the distant icy mountains. ‘Show yourself!’

He heard a stifled sob and found her crouching in the ruin of a blasted gun dome. She was pressed into the cover of the broken stone walls, staring down at the debris-strewn wasteland at the foot of the bastion.

‘Come away,’ he demanded. ‘We have to go, now!’

‘Do you see him?’ Keeler ignored his words. ‘Helig, look!’

A sound reached Gallor’s hearing – a deep, sonorous crackle like the breaking of stones – and he automatically tensed. He knew the noise: the

shattering of ceramite armour.

A sickly dread tightened around his chest as the legionary spied the figures duelling far below. He let out a snarl of anger as he saw Garro take a mortal blow and crash to the ground. Gallor's ire became shock as he realised that the cadaverous, skeletal giant who had landed the hit could only be the primarch. *Mortarion.*

'Gene-father?' he whispered. 'I cannot believe that is… him.'

'It is,' Keeler said quietly. 'It's what they will all become, when Horus wins.'

'*If,*' Gallor countered, silencing his own misgivings before they could take root. He put his hand around Keeler's arm and applied pressure to pull her away, but she remained in place. He sensed he could not move her unless she wished it. *How was that possible?*

The woman nodded towards Garro, gasping in anguish as he took hit after hit from the Death Lord's great scythe. 'Mortarion will kill him.'

'Yes.' A terrible certainty settled on Gallor. It felt impossible to look away, as if to do so would be the gravest cowardice imaginable.

We will watch Nathaniel Garro die, he told himself. *We must bear witness.*

Down in the arena of ruins and blood, the thing that was Mortarion changed anew, growing great and monstrous wings that rose up to throw darkness over the place where Garro had fallen. A dense swarm of shimmering plague flies swirled around them, droning madly.

Gallor stiffened, dreading what might come next, dreading what he would see when the primarch's dark acts were ended. *The body of a fallen champion? Or something worse?*

'Garro gave his life to distract the traitors,' said the warrior, finally breaking the spell of the desolate moment upon them. 'We must escape, or his sacrifice will count for nothing.'

Keeler stood up and turned her gaze away – but not towards Gallor and the way to the landing pad. She stared in the opposite direction, towards the towers and the great halls of the Imperial Palace itself, far beyond the line of battle.

Gallor grimaced. 'He's gone, Euphrati.'

'No,' she said distantly. 'Not yet.'

The agony was infernal, as deep and murky as the foul, cloying gloom that

engulfed him.

The world closed in, shrinking down from a battlefield, to an arena, to a blood-spattered spot on a slab of broken pavement. There lay Nathaniel Garro – Dusk Raider, Death Guard, Knight Errant – and he was dying with each thrumming double-beat of his augmented hearts.

Dark, bioengineered blood, the red of it so deeply shaded it was almost black, pooled about his body and gathered in the lines of his skin. Garro saw it painted over the palms of his armoured gauntlets and the dusty stone where he had collapsed.

He tasted the rich copper-iron tang of it in his mouth and felt the burn of his omophagea organ unlacing the genetic structure of the fluid, sifting it for memory chains. It would drown him in his own recollections unless he could break free, but to move, even to breathe, was like a forest of knives in his chest.

Garro had known pain. He had made it his companion in war after war. But never like this. This was suffering beyond any he had experienced before.

'I will end this,' said the voice of death itself. ***'You will endure, and you will* rise.'** The Reaper of Men loomed over him, each word he spoke the cold wind from a sepulchre, each word repeated in the violent buzzing of the black swarm. ***'But first, you must perish.'***

Garro tried to find the energy to speak, to spit back the defiance in his bones, but he could not.

And then another voice spoke for him. *'No.'* The Saint's whispered words fell through his mind on threads of golden gossamer, delicate but unbreakable. *'Not yet.'*

The sun-warmth he had felt before drenched him anew. Garro's pain receded, the tide of it drawn out and banished. A power from beyond the bounds of his flesh and blood stiffened his sinews and steeled his nerves. He moved. He *rose*.

What seconds ago had seemed like an impossible task was now inevitable. His jaw set, his defiance burning brightly, the wounded Knight Errant embraced this new, fiery strength, and came to his feet once again.

Garro looked down at his bloody gauntlet, and for an instant, he saw the ghost of Keeler's hand in his, as it had been back in the fortress. Her touch was still upon him, and by means that he could only guess at, she was

renewing him. She was channelling an incredible strength into his flesh, acting as the conduit for something greater than both of them.

He had become like her. In this brief moment, Garro was the avatar for a power beyond the mortal.

The darkness about him receded, and with a heavy tread, the Reaper of Men did something rare for a Death Guard – he *retreated*, drawing back step upon step. His insectile wings rippled and twitched, and the gaunt face in the hollows of his hood creased in anger and confusion.

'You cannot resist me,' hissed the primarch.

'I can,' Garro answered with a furious snarl, dragging *Libertas* up from the dust in a blazing arc of blue light. 'I will. *I must!*' Shouting his rage and defiance, he threw himself into his attack.

Mortarion's hesitation lasted scarcely a blink, but it was enough for the embattled legionary to come at him, sword rising high.

The Death Lord reacted with lightning speed and *Silence* swung through a tight, humming arc, the corroded steel of the war-scythe's great head meeting the powerblade with a thunderbolt crash.

Blue fire erupted at the point where the edges of sword and scythe crossed, casting jumping shadows across the broken ground. Mortarion leaned into the parry, but Garro stood his ground, giving nothing, matching him strength for strength.

Impossible. The Knight Errant was no more than a legionary of the line, strong and powerful in comparison to any ordinary human, but in no way the equal of a primarch. Mortarion should have been able to cut him in two with a single sweep of his weapon; more than that, Garro should already have been dead.

But he stood there, matching Mortarion's effort blade to blade, as if the primarch were battling his own doppelgänger.

A shrill, ear-splitting shriek went through the black swarm of bloated, festering insects and the mass reacted like a living thing. They recoiled from around Garro's form as if repelled by an invisible force, many of them flashing into sizzling ash, the rest of them retreating back and away. Something in the fallen legionary had become toxic to the Lord of Flies, anathema to the daemon's very presence.

Mortarion drew in a deep, wheezing breath, and he tasted it on his curdled

lips.

Witchery.

The burning metallic rasp of psionic spoor was all about him, spilling from Garro's weakened aura – but not from the legionary himself.

No. The Knight Errant was no psyker, his soul born without that elusive key to the immaterium. This power was coming from somewhere – *someone* – else.

Mortarion was still coming to grips with the new, preternatural senses the Grandfather's Mark had given him, but he had instinct enough to perceive the source of the energy about Garro.

'Your Saint cannot save you,' he growled, his attention returning to the play of blades. ***'You are already dead, Nathaniel.'***

'Then in that, my lord, we are the same.' Garro's eyes were alight with martial fury.

A hollow rasp of laughter burst from the primarch. ***'Such a staid, hidebound fool, captain. So rigid in your spirit, so brittle in flesh!'*** He shook the scythe, the metal clashing together again. ***'You turned your back on greatness, on immortality itself! You swore an oath to me and my Legion, and then shattered it because of your cowardice and fear!'***

'My oath remains unbroken!' Garro shot back the retort. '*You* betrayed the Emperor!'

'No, my son. There is only one traitor here.' Behind his mask, Mortarion's lip curled. ***'You have always set yourself above others because of your origins. You think yourself superior because you were born on this planet. Because being Terran makes you closer to my father, yes? But that means nothing.'*** Venom boiled in his throat as he decried his wayward warrior. ***'My birthplace matters not. I was reborn on Barbarus and my foster-father there was no less a monster than the one in this palace. The Death Guard grew in that world's poisoned garden, and only they know what it is to be truly loyal…'*** He threw a nod towards Typhus and the phalanxes of Plague Marines. ***'Every last traitor from our ranks will be purged. In time, nothing of the old way will remain.'***

'You have… broken my heart.' Garro's eyes darkened. 'I would have done anything for you, Mortarion. If only you had not betrayed us. But you have become the lie, and led my brothers to ruin! You are the thing you always swore to hate and revile! You deceive yourself and the Legion pays the

price!’

Their blades broke contact with an oscillating wail and the combatants circled one another, searching for an opening.

‘You think you know me?’ Mortarion gave a shake of the head. ***‘The most desolate horror you have ever experienced is only an ember against the inferno of my suffering. I have seen what lies in the darkest shadows. I have fought the chaos at the edge of death!’***

‘I believe you,’ said Garro, with a weary exhalation. ‘But still you blind yourself to the truth, gene-sire. How can you claim to loathe sorcery even as you make pacts with the things that live in the warp? You betray Terra, the Legion, the Emperor… And you betray *yourself.’*

‘Kill it!’ The bellowed cry came from Typhus, standing atop a collapsed pillar. He brandished his manreaper, shaking it at the sky. ***‘Kill the traitor weakling! Let it die!’***

‘*Let it die!’* Mortarion’s pestilent warriors beat their weapons together in a cacophony of rusted steel, echoing the Traveller’s demand.

Let it die. Let it die. Let it die. Let it die.

The whispers in his ears joined in the chorus, and Mortarion knew that it was the voice of the warp reaching out to him. The Grandfather’s guiding hand pushed him towards the ultimate act.

He glared at his former legionary and saw clearly that this moment had always been here in his path, waiting for him to meet it.

Each step Mortarion had taken – beginning with his rebellion against his Overlord foster-father on Barbarus, his turbulent brotherhood with the man who had become Typhus the Traveller, the reunion with his gene-father, and finally the Death Guard’s rebirth by Nurgle’s blessing – all these things had been ordained. Each one stripped away the lies that Mortarion had been told about himself, piece by piece, until none remained.

The Knight Errant would perish today, and his murder would mark the fruition of Mortarion’s complete truth. Garro was the primarch’s final connection to his Legion as it had been before the Great Change, the emblem of the last tiny part of him that still remained human. It had to be obliterated.

Let it die.

‘I will,’ he vowed, marshalling his power for the fatal strike.

The great jagged blade of Mortarion’s war-scythe carved smoke as it fell in

an arc of befouled steel. The cursed weapon pulsed with the Grandfather's rancid consecration, and the legionary's desperate attempt to parry it met with failure.

Even bolstered by the fortitude of his Saint, Garro could not stop the fall of *Silence*. The scythe splintered the Knight Errant's venerable blade across its width, breaking the power sword *Libertas* in two.

Mortarion's weapon punched through the last intact layers of the legionary's armour. The point of the scythe-head pushed into bone and flesh. It found his primary heart and punctured it, ripping it in twain.

Wounded mortally, blood surging into his chest cavity, Garro went rigid and his agony became total. The steadfast battle-captain reached out with one trembling hand and clutched at the head of the scythe, his gauntlet sizzling as the ceramite burned on contact with corrupted metal.

The blade wedged in the legionary's chest, Mortarion let the weight of *Silence* force Garro to his knees. Inky threads of toxicity were already eating into the Knight Errant's wargear, and where the scythe met flesh it was poisoning him, dissolving his veins and nerves.

The primarch watched the shadow of death lengthen over Garro's form. This time, he would not rise.

Pinned in place against the blood-washed rubble, Garro's body shook as one by one, each of his implants and vital organs began to shut down. His genhanced flesh and bones – the greatest weapons that the Emperor's science had gifted to him – were not immortal. His end was at hand. Nothing could stop that now.

What would come next? Abyssal darkness? Or would there be some shining, transcendent moment of clarity as the light of life faded?

To Garro's surprise, what freed itself within him was a smile. He released a wet, broken chuckle. He understood his purpose now. Everything was made clear.

'You… know this,' said Garro, labouring out every last word. 'When I die, Mortarion… Your humanity dies with me.'

'As is my wish,' intoned the primarch, tightening his grip on *Silence*'s shaft. ***'I no longer care for such concerns.'***

'Lie,' managed Garro, panting through a blood-filled breath. 'I know… truth. Hidden in your heart. You lie… to yourself. You always have.' He

gritted his teeth and gave a bitter laugh. ‘In this moment… *you sow the seed of your final defeat.’*

Mortarion hesitated, frozen in place, as Garro’s utterance registered with him. Even now, on the precipice of death, the legionary’s words were inescapable. They were undeniable.

From somewhere high atop the broken flanks of the Marmax Bastion, a flash of white light blossomed into being and the drumming rumble of thrusters came like a clarion call.

A machine in the shape of a winged bullet blasted itself out of the landing pad and cut a curving turn up and around the fallen tiers of the bastion. Typhus screamed wordlessly and every projectile weapon on the ground opened up at once.

The gathered Death Guard host bracketed the craft, vomiting bilious fire and lethal ejecta into the air. A webwork of criss-crossing rocket-shell contrails and ropes of searing tracer clawed after the heavy carrier as it skidded through the smoke, overstressed engines howling as they pushed it towards the sky. Some of the ground-fire clipped the fuselage and it veered wildly to avoid a terminal strike that might bring it down.

Then, finding its pace, gaining traction against gravity and drag, the carrier shot towards the distant towers and armoured precincts of the Inner Imperial Palace. A double peal of thunder sounded as the craft breached the sound barrier and raced away at supersonic velocity.

Garro’s hazy, pain-misted vision caught sight of the silver dart as it receded. He knew that Helig Gallor was at the controls, with Euphrati Keeler and whomever remained of Kostagar’s surviving defenders in his charge.

‘She is safe,’ he gasped, ‘and you have failed, Mortarion.’

Whatever plan the Death Lord had, to take the Saint as his prize for Horus Lupercal, to turn Garro to the banner of the Warmaster’s heretics, it was now a ruin.

And the price of it was the life of a martyr. *I pay the cost,* Garro told himself. *As I was always meant to.*

This was the purpose towards which Nathaniel Garro’s path had been wrought. The moment in which he placed the existence of the Saint before all else. The moment when he saved her.

‘No…’ Mortarion’s grave-rasp rose into a furious snarl. ***‘Even in your***

death you hinder me.’

‘Aye,’ he breathed, gathering every last iota of strength still in his body, before the will leaked out into the thirsting dust along with his blood. ‘I deny you your victory. You will never have… what you wish. Such is the fate… of oath-breakers.’

And then, with a final bellow of effort, Garro pulled himself up the blade of the scythe, forcing it through his torso, the razored tip bursting out of his back, all so he could bring himself closer.

Close enough for one last strike.

The broken stub of *Libertas* still in his other hand, Garro rammed the shattered sword into Mortarion’s throat, burying it to the hilt. Toxic vitae spewed in a virulent spray, gushing down over the neck ring of the primarch’s rusted armour.

As Garro sank back into the blood-thickened mud, Mortarion ripped the broken sword from the cut and let out a gurgling, monstrous howl of pain. He pressed a hand to the wound, holding his flesh together. The righteous blow filled his throat with hot bile and sickly ichor, and despite the Mark of the warp on his flesh, the primarch’s new injury would not be quick to close.

Darkness closed in softly from the edges of Garro’s vision, and the discord around him faded, becoming distant. The twinned sound of his primary and secondary hearts, the pulsing force of life that had been his companion for so long, had been reduced to one single throbbing drumbeat.

The sound began to slow.

Sunlight flashed off the mote of silver in the sky, marking the fading glimmer of Keeler’s escape. He felt a wave of sorrow for the Saint. She would have to go on without him and bear the great burden of the Imperial Truth beyond this day. More than anything, Garro wanted to be by her side to carry on the fight against the great Chaos, but he knew he would not live to see another battle. He took meagre comfort in the knowledge that the war against the heretics would not falter, not if it took a century, a millennia, or more.

Death drew near, the shadow of it falling across him. Garro had been to the brink of this chasm before, but always managed to pull back.

Now he was falling, destined to it. The instances between the beats of his heart grew longer, their force fading.

Garro looked up, and as his vision clouded he beheld an image of death. What men of ancient ages past would have called Thanatos, Azrael, the Grim Reaper, Mortarion had become in reality. The gaunt, hooded primarch was not death in peace, death in nobility or death in honour – he was the horror of it, the decay and destruction of that ultimate end.

But Garro's final conscious act would not be to surrender to that. Defiance filled his spirit as the shadows blurred the world about him, and as time lengthened and slowed, a light – *a golden*, *beautiful light* – came into being before him. Mortarion and his twisted Legions, the ruins and the vista of the battle beyond, these things faded as the light grew and grew.

Through the heart of the glorious illumination came a great figure in magnificent, gilded armour, as if stepping through it like a doorway. The figure in shimmering, perfect gold looked towards the fallen legionary and met his gaze.

Is this real? Garro's thoughts became a torrent of emotions and impressions.

Is this my failing mind manifesting a last surge of life before the end?

Or is it Him?

There were no words. The golden warrior gave a paternal nod and extended an open hand. The legionary knew that if he took it, if he accepted and truly *believed* without doubt or hesitation, there would come a time when he might rise anew.

Trembling, the son of Albia and Terra, the Dusk Raider, the Death Guard, the Knight Errant, reached out to take the offered hand. As he did so, he saw that the metal of his gauntlets, the flesh and bone beneath were becoming dust and crumbling into the winds. But it did not matter. The rough substance of his being was no longer important. It was his soul that would live in eternity.

He should have been afraid, but in that moment he was elated. For within it, his purpose had at last been fulfilled.

The God-Emperor knew his name; and Nathaniel Garro's duty was at an end.

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His faith protecting him, Garro faces his father in single combat.

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AFTERWORD

Today I killed an old friend.

I led him to his ending and we parted in the way that we had first met, in the clash of blades and fire on a battlefield thirty millennia from now. I am sorry to see him go, but I am glad to have been with him on his journey.

Nathaniel Garro's end has been a long time coming, and it's true to say it was not something considered lightly, or done out of expedience. Twelve years before I sat down to write this afterword, I was busy working on *Oath of Moment*, the first in what would become a series of audio dramas tracing Garro's adventures through the tumult of the galaxy-spanning civil war that is the Horus Heresy. And as I wrote *Oath*, I knew there was potential to take the venerable battle-captain through an entire arc of stories, towards a final and definitive end point. Even as I wrote the first of his stories, I had decided how the last of them would play out – in the inevitable confrontation between the Death Guard legionary who had never broken his

oath, and the primarch who had led his Legion into the arms of the Ruinous Powers.

Garro first takes a leading role in the Horus Heresy during the events of *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, which was also my first novel in the Heresy saga, so in that he became a firm favourite of mine, and ultimately, one of the viewpoint characters through which readers would see the unfolding of the Warmaster's rebellion. After I finished work on *Flight*, back in those heady days when the series was just getting air under its wings, I'd expected Garro to join the roster of heroes being used by the Black Library author collective – but after leaving him on Terra with an open ending to his fate, I soon realised that if anyone was going to carry on his story, I wanted it to be me.

Readers kept asking: *When is Garro coming back? What happens to him next?* I knew I had to give them an answer.

And like a lot of things in the writing game, Garro's return was a matter of a confluence of fortunate events. Black Library were getting into the business of audio dramas – not just audiobooks, but original stories written specifically to be performed by a cast of actors, with music and sound effects – and they wanted a Horus Heresy series. Readers wanted Garro, and with my previous experience writing audio, it was a perfect match. *Oath* came first (where Nathaniel takes on the role of Malcador's 'Agentia Primus'), picking up story threads from *Flight*, followed over the next five years by *Legion of One*, *Sword of Truth*, *Burden of Duty*, *Shield of Lies* and *Ashes of Fealty*.

Garro became an integral figure in the Heresy saga, leading to his appearance in a limited edition novella (*Vow of Faith*) and eventually, the full 'bind-up' novel *Weapon of Fate*, which adapted and compiled all of Nathaniel's adventures to date into one complete volume. I brought him back again as part of *The Buried Dagger*, the final novel before the last act of the Horus Heresy, the Siege of Terra – but even there, his story wasn't concluded.

From the start, I'd hoped to end Garro's narrative as I'd started it, as a full-cast audio drama, but changing reader tastes for Black Library fiction brought us to a different place, and it was my long-time editor, Nick Kyme, who encouraged me to reimagine and present *Knight of Grey* in the novella form that you've just read. As a book, it's allowed me to go to places I

might not have been able to visit in audio, and dwell on moments that bring this character's journey into sharp relief.

This story marks an end point for something that was a big part of my authorial career for over a decade and a half. Writing Garro's odyssey has been an honour and a privilege that has rewarded me personally and professionally in ways I never could have expected. I've met some incredible people through these stories, creators and fans alike, and I wouldn't change any of those experiences for all the gold on Terra.

There will be some among you reading this who may not be happy about Garro's ultimate fate – but to those readers, I can only remind you that the Horus Heresy has always been a tragedy. It's a story about belief and sacrifice, and the truth behind the lies. It was *never* going to have a happy ending.

Today, Nathaniel's story concludes – but his example and his legend, like all true heroes of myth and fable, will never die.

James Swallow
March 2022

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Firstly, and most importantly, I would like to thank all the readers who took Garro to their hearts and supported his adventures.

Thanks are due to everyone at Black Library for giving me the opportunity to bring this saga to a close, and I'd like to especially salute Nick Kyme and Caroline Hawley for their hard work.

And once more, much respect to the other creatives through the years who helped breathe life into Nathaniel Garro: Andy Chambers, Gav Thorpe, Jervis Johnson and Christopher Allen, who first wrote about him in the *Epic 40,000* rulebook and *Index Astartes*; artists John Gravato, Steve Horvath, Karl Richardson, Marta Detlaff, Rachel Pierce and Neil Roberts, who encapsulated his nobility and power through their incredible work; Israel Gonzalez, who sculpted his amazing Forge World figure; and actor Toby Longworth, who first gave him a voice.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James Swallow is the author of the Horus Heresy novels *Fear to Tread* and *Nemesis*, which both reached the *New York Times* bestseller lists. Also for the Horus Heresy, he has written *The Flight of the Eisenstein*, *The Buried Dagger* and a series of audio dramas featuring the character Nathaniel Garro, the prose versions of which have now been collected into the anthology *Garro*. For Warhammer 40,000, he is best known for his four Blood Angels novels, the audio drama *Heart of Rage*, and his two Sisters of Battle novels. His short fiction has appeared in *Legends of the Space Marines* and *Tales of Heresy*.

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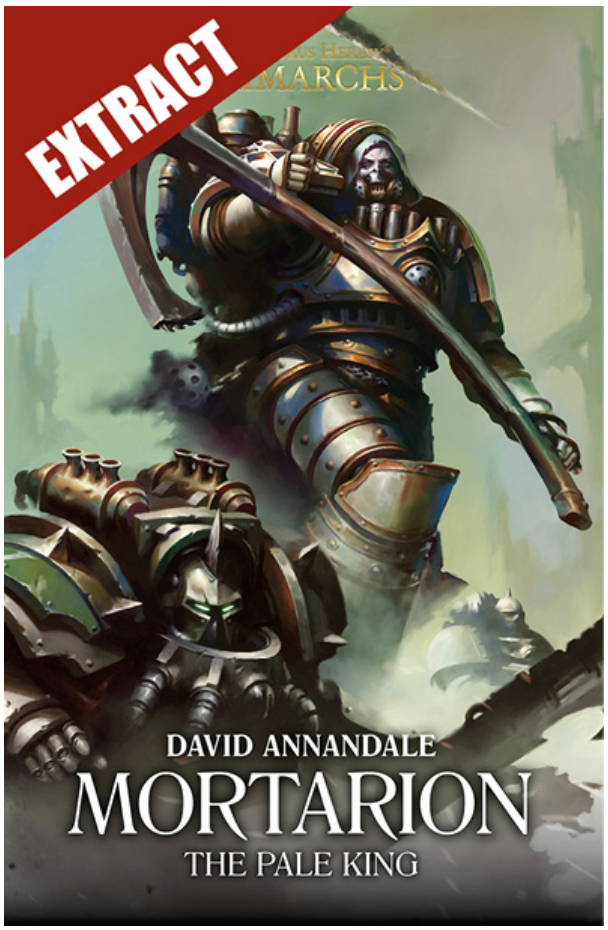
An extract from *Mortarion: The Pale King*.



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Mortarion strode the halls, and the crew scurried from his path, birds fleeing a storm. He had just returned to the ship, and was making his way from the docking bay to his quarters. He had stopped on the bridge to give terse instructions to the shipmaster, and the *Reaper's Scythe* was making for the new coordinates, leaving the rest of the Death Guard fleet behind. Now, as he walked, silence spread before him, and anxiety drifted in his wake. He was cold anger and the promise of death sweeping through the gloom of the vaulted halls of his flagship. Even his sons knew better than to approach him. They all saw the thunder on his pallid brow, and gave him the solitude his fury commanded.

All of them except Calas Typhon. He had followed Mortarion from the bridge. The primarch was aware of his presence, two steps behind. Typhon was respecting Mortarion's anger, but was also persistent with his presence. Finally, at the door to his quarters, Mortarion stopped and acknowledged the warrior.

'Ask your question,' he said. They were alone. Mortarion's voice echoed off the bone-white pillars that stood like the ribs of a titanic beast down the length of the grand corridor.

'Why are we heading back to Galaspar, my lord?' Typhon asked.

'Because the Emperor wills it.'

Typhon looked baffled. 'But the conquest is done. Galaspar is compliant.'

'The lessons we must draw from it are not done.'

Typhon said nothing for a while. His eyes narrowed in thought. They were dark eyes, deep in their hollows under his heavy brow. His mouth was half hidden behind his beard. Typhon kept his own counsel, and there were few who could read him if he did not wish them to.

Finally, he said, ‘I would have thought that we were the ones to teach others the lessons of Galaspar.’

Others. Typhon had guessed well. He had some idea of who might be waiting to meet the *Reaper’s Scythe* on Galaspar. Mortarion wondered how much else he had guessed and was being careful not to say.

He thought of what he could say to Typhon, though he would not. He would not talk about his meeting with his father aboard the *Bucephelus*.

He had never been comfortable aboard his father’s battle-barge. The golden ship was a colossus of glory. It was magnificence wrought of martial power and the artisan’s genius. To walk its halls was to be inside the fullest manifestation of strength and art. Its display was the promise of the Great Crusade, and of the Emperor’s dream for humanity. Mortarion had his part to play in that dream. But as he understood it, and in the form in which he believed in it, that role had little to do with glory. Gold was luxury, and luxury was foreign to Mortarion. It had had no place on Barbarus. There was no luxury in the necessity that drove him.

So, he had not expected laurels when he had come to the *Bucephelus* to meet with his father after his first conquest. He had taken Galaspar because it was necessary, not just for the progress of the Great Crusade, but for himself. He had not taken that fallen empire in the hopes of receiving his father’s praise.

What he had not expected was sorrow.

That surprised him. It confused him.

Did I not do what was asked of me?

The Emperor’s slow nod of the head. The acknowledgement that yes, Mortarion had fulfilled his task. But those eyes. The eyes of that golden being who was still, in many ways, as much a stranger to Mortarion as when He had first appeared on Barbarus. The eyes that looked at him with sorrow. And with a new commandment.

‘Perhaps we are going to deliver a lesson,’ Mortarion said to Typhon, knowing that neither of them believed that was true. ‘Two of my brothers will be waiting there for us.’

Worlds still burned in the Galaspar Cluster. The embers of the short war sparked and flared, marked by the errant snatches of signals picked up and reported by the vox-officer of the *Reaper’s Scythe*. Standing at the

command pulpit that jutted from the raised strategium over the centre of the bridge, Mortarion could almost smell the death of the Order's empire in the void. He had passed through the Galaspar Cluster, and the evidence of his passing was everywhere to be found. It was there in those vox fragments, marking the final dissolution of tyranny. It was there in the transponder signals from Imperial ships, freely crossing a region it would have been death to venture into a short time ago.

The signs of his passage were visible too, through the great window of the bridge, as the *Reaper's Scythe* closed in on Galaspar itself. The near space of the planet, far beyond its immediate orbit, was awash with debris. Dark, scorched rubble that had been fortress monitors tumbled past the battle-barge, a silent acknowledgement of Mortarion's work. Some of the wrecks were large enough to be recognisable ghosts of their original shape. A prow went by as Mortarion watched, turning slowly end over end. Further out was a portion of a hull, decking still attached, a cross-section of destruction. Still more of the wreckage no longer had an identity. The pieces were jagged, twisted abstractions. They were all monuments, silent and cold, to the war, and to the sweep of Mortarion's scythe. They were the right and proper lesson of Galaspar. They were the mark of the first great act of the unified Death Guard.

I have done this, and I was right to do it.

'The marks of our journey,' Typhon commented, from a few feet back in the strategium.

'The marks of our accomplishment,' Mortarion said. He did not take pride in the aesthetic perfection of his strategy, as Fulgrim might have. That was vanity. He was proud of being able to see what was necessary, and of then having carried it out.

As the *Reaper's Scythe* closed in on Galaspar, the number of Imperial ships visible or signalling their approach grew.

'So many arrivals,' said Typhon. 'I trust they're enjoying their smooth passage.'

'They should be grateful,' said Mortarion. *They should be grateful to me, and to my Legion.*

'I remember our first voyage to the planet,' said Typhon. 'It was not smooth.'

I remember the sacrifices. 'It was necessary.'

‘Multiple hails, my lord,’ the vox-officer called.

‘Who from?’

‘The *Vengeful Spirit* and the *Red Tear*, my lord.’

‘Flagships,’ said Typhon. ‘Maybe the gathering is an honour?’

Mortarion said nothing.

‘A *trial?*’ Typhon whispered in disbelief.

‘A wasteland,’ said Sanguinius, his tone sorrowful. ‘A wasteland upon a wasteland.’

Horus could not disagree. He and Sanguinius stood together on a ridge of fused wreckage, surveying a plain of annihilation. The rad levels were lethal, the atmosphere poison to a mortal within minutes. The air roiled brown and green, with stagnant layers of oily rainbow colours hovering like floating swamps. Craters overlapped each other. They were surrounded by the mangled remnants of engines of war. There had been tanks on the plain, thousands upon thousands. Their corpses, blackened and torn and melted, had fused with each other, creating a web of congealed metal extending to the horizon.

‘We could almost be looking at a sculpture,’ Sanguinius said softly. ‘Almost a work of art by design. I wonder what Fulgrim would think.’ After a pause, the Angel continued. ‘No, I do not think he would appreciate it.’

For a moment, Horus wondered if Sanguinius might be joking. He glanced at the Angel, and saw the grim set of his mouth, and the frown of concern.

‘A wasteland,’ Sanguinius said again.

‘Worse than the moons of Baal?’ Horus asked.

‘In its way, yes. Those wastes are products of the fallen ages, the mire from which our father is lifting all of us. They are not the work of today, by one of us.’ He pointed behind them. ‘And they are not that kind of work.’

They were a few kilometres from the outer walls of Galaspar’s primary hive. Months after the end of the war, smoke still poured out of the towering arcology. The cone shape of the hive was slumped too, the city deformed by the hammer blow Mortarion had struck. They were on the wrong side of the hive to see the full extent of the damage, but Horus had taken stock of it during the flight down to the surface in the Stormbird *Wolf’s Eye*. The devastation was colossal.

Then there were the mounds of bodies. They were the foothills to the

mountain of the hive, some fifteen metres high and more. Rad-suited workers clambered over them, engaged in no task that Horus could identify. New hills were growing as more and more corpses were carried out of the hive by cargo transports or pushed in from the plain by bulldozers.

'What has he done?' said Sanguinius.

'That is what we are here to learn,' Horus answered.

'We can already see that this was a massacre.'

'It has that appearance, granted.' Horus tried to sound a note of caution.

'*Appearance?*'

'Don't forget the reasons why Mortarion was sent here. The struggle for compliance of the Galaspar Cluster could have been much longer, and much costlier.'

'I don't see how it could have been costlier for Galaspar,' said Sanguinius.

'Precisely,' said Horus. 'We don't see yet. We cannot prejudge without all the information. And we have only just arrived.'

'Arrived to see mountains of corpses.'

'I know,' said Horus. He grimaced and placed a hand on the Angel's shoulder. 'Our judgement must not be rushed, though. I understand the temptation. Believe me, I feel it too. That, I am convinced, is why our father sent us to meet with Mortarion. We can check each other's first impulses without causing offence.'

'You think we can check Mortarion's too?'

'I don't know. What I do know is that I want to understand what happened, and why.' Horus opened his arms to take in the surrounding devastation. 'This may be the best enforcement of compliance that could possibly have been achieved, given the nature of the Order.'

'Do you really believe that?' Sanguinius asked. When Horus hesitated, he pushed on. 'Would our father have sent us here if He rejoiced in what has happened?'

'I know what I am *tempted* to believe,' said Horus. 'That is a long way from knowing, and understanding.'

'You're right. But it is right, too, that we express what this desolation means to us.'

'Agreed,' said Horus. 'And I think it is good that we have our time to think about that before Mortarion arrives.'

Sanguinius smiled. 'The better to check our first impulses?'

Horus smiled back. ‘I do think it’s best that we greet him calmly, don’t you?’

‘I think he is unlikely to be in the best frame of mind, being summoned back.’ Sanguinius looked again at the workers swarming over the hills of the dead. ‘What *are* they doing?’ he muttered.

They heard the roar of the Storm Eagle’s engines long before they saw it. The atmosphere was thick as sludge, and the gunship *Finality* came into sight first as a fiery streak in the murk. Clouds burst into flame at its passing. The earth shook beneath the force of its retro rockets as it slowed, coming in for a landing on the prey its master had killed. It landed a short distance from the gunships that had brought the other primarchs.

The ship seemed unadorned compared to those of its brother Legions. The olive-green band of the emblem on its wings made the bone colour of the rest of the hull even more apparent. It was a machine that had been scraped raw. It was, Horus thought, a suitable chariot for his brother, and that saddened him.

The side doors opened, and Mortarion exited, alone. He walked through the fumes and ash of the plain towards the primarchs.

‘Let me greet him first,’ Horus said.

Sanguinius nodded.

Horus strode down the ridge and over the wreckage to meet the lord of the Death Guard.

Mortarion’s armour, the Barbaran Plate, was an artefact that somehow made brass look not resplendent, but instead the match of the worn bone colour of *Finality*. It was the brass of monuments, of sarcophagi, of the remembrance of things lost. He wore a grey cloak with the hood pulled up over his head, and in its shadow, his features were sharp as a premonition. He was gaunt, hairless, and his eyes were sunken. Deep furrows on his cheeks accentuated the presence of his skull still further, as if his skin were old, tight parchment, a thin veil over the dark reality beneath. He was solemn as a mourning dawn. The lower half of his face was covered by his rebreather. It was of the same grieving brass as his armour. Poisonous gases vented after every exhalation. Mortarion breathed the atmosphere of Galaspar mixed with traces of the noxious air of Barbarus. It was, Horus

thought, as if no matter where Mortarion went, he never truly left the toxic world that had nurtured him.

Mortarion's gaze flicked past Horus to Sanguinius, then back again. His eyes glittered with suspicion.

'I rejoice to see you,' Horus said as he drew near.

Mortarion stopped. 'Are you here to welcome me, when it should be me who welcomes you to Galaspar?'

'I'm here to greet you as a brother, and I think you know that. You also know that none of us are laying claim to this or any other world being brought into compliance.' He held out a hand. 'Tell me you're glad to see me too, Mortarion.'

He was glad to see Horus. That much was true, and he stepped forward into the embrace. He broke from it quickly, not from any animosity, but because he disliked the gesture itself. An embrace was a promise of unity and comfort. That made it a promise of illusion. That made it a lie. He knew that Horus didn't look at things that way. That didn't change the truth of things. Horus was lying, only not to Mortarion. He was lying to himself.

Mortarion put much more stock in his ceremony of poison. To share a draught of concentrated toxins with one of his warriors was to acknowledge the reality of their lives. He and his legionaries stood with each other, fought with unity, but never pretended that the ultimate truth of war was anything other than death. In the toast of poisons, there was no promise that could not be kept. It was an acceptance of risk, and of the inevitability of the end.

Mortarion looked past Horus, up the slope of rubble to where the Angel waited. Mortarion was less pleased to see him. Sanguinius was so consumed by the illusion of nobility that Mortarion felt the Angel was perpetually looking down from on high as he circled an unreachable ideal. Why had their father instructed the Angel to come to Galaspar? Why not someone like Perturabo? He might have been an ally. And Sanguinius and Horus were so close. Mortarion felt a bond with Horus, but he knew it was not as strong as the one that joined Horus to the Angel. He was facing a united front, whether or not the other two would admit it, even to themselves.

'Well,' he said to Horus. 'Am I here to account for myself?'

‘You are,’ said Horus. ‘It gives me no pleasure to say that.’

‘It gives me still less to hear it,’ Mortarion snapped.

He marched up the rubble to the Angel. ‘Sanguinius,’ he said, his voice flat and cold. ‘So?’ he asked his brothers. ‘What is it that you think I have done here?’

‘It isn’t a question of what we think,’ said Sanguinius. ‘Or at least, it shouldn’t be.’

‘We’ve come to listen, not just to observe,’ said Horus. ‘We’ve come to understand.’

‘Don’t condescend to me, Horus,’ Mortarion said. ‘I thought you were better than that.’

‘I’m not condescending. If I ever do, I’m wrong, and I should be shown my error. But I meant exactly what I said, brother. I need to understand what has happened here. We both do.’

‘You speak as if the outcome of the war were a mystery. I came here to bring Galaspar into compliance. I succeeded.’

‘Galaspar is unprecedented,’ said Sanguinius. ‘It is unlike other compliance campaigns.’

‘There we agree,’ Mortarion told him.

‘There must, therefore, be much to be learnt from it.’ Sanguinius paused significantly. ‘For *all* of us.’

Do you think you are being subtle, Sanguinius? I hope not. ‘I am *quite* willing to help you understand,’ Mortarion said. He bit off each syllable, staring coldly at the Angel.

Sanguinius stared right back. ‘Help me understand this, then,’ he said. He pointed to one of the hills of corpses. ‘Those mortals, for instance. What are they doing?’

‘They are tallying the dead of the Order,’ said Mortarion.

‘Why?’

‘Because I commanded it.’

Sanguinius shook his head. He opened his mouth to say something else, but Horus stepped in.

‘This is precisely what we are here to learn,’ Horus said. He nodded to Sanguinius, who shrugged, letting his objections go for the time being. ‘We have questions about the campaign, and about what you have left behind. Clarity will help us. You too, Mortarion.’

‘I believe in clarity,’ Mortarion told him, still speaking in a measured, cold monotone.

‘Then you will help us understand?’

‘I will.’ Despite his defensiveness, he felt a certain eagerness. Yes, they *should* understand. Yes, they *should* see the full truth of Galaspar. Let them judge him after that. Perhaps their father would see more clearly too. ‘I have nothing to hide.’

‘We don’t mean to imply you do,’ said Horus.

‘It’s not your honesty that concerns us,’ said Sanguinius.

‘What then, my judgement?’

‘Precisely.’

They looked at each other in silence. Horus finally broke it. ‘It would be helpful,’ he said, ‘if our remembrancers had the opportunity to speak with some of the members of the Order. Where are the prisoners kept?’

‘There are none,’ said Mortarion.

‘You released them?’ Horus asked, startled.

Mortarion snorted. ‘Of course not. There are no prisoners because no one from the Order was left alive.’

‘You killed them all,’ said Sanguinius, apparently finding it necessary to state the obvious.

‘Yes.’

Mortarion’s affirmation fell into another silence. It lasted long enough for his brothers to look uneasy.

‘The Order kept records,’ Mortarion said, ignoring the discomfort. ‘Its archives are prodigious. The ones that survived the war are preserved. I trust that will provide you with what you need.’

‘It will,’ Horus said.

‘We may hold this council aboard the *Reaper’s Scythe* if you prefer,’ said Sanguinius, sounding sympathetic now. The look in his eyes reminded Mortarion of their father’s sorrow, and he did not like it.

‘No,’ Mortarion said. He pointed to the ruined hive. ‘Let our *understanding* be conducted there. That is where the battle on Galaspar began, and where it was decided. Go there, my brothers. See all that there is to see. You want to know how I conducted the war and why? Then you shall.’

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